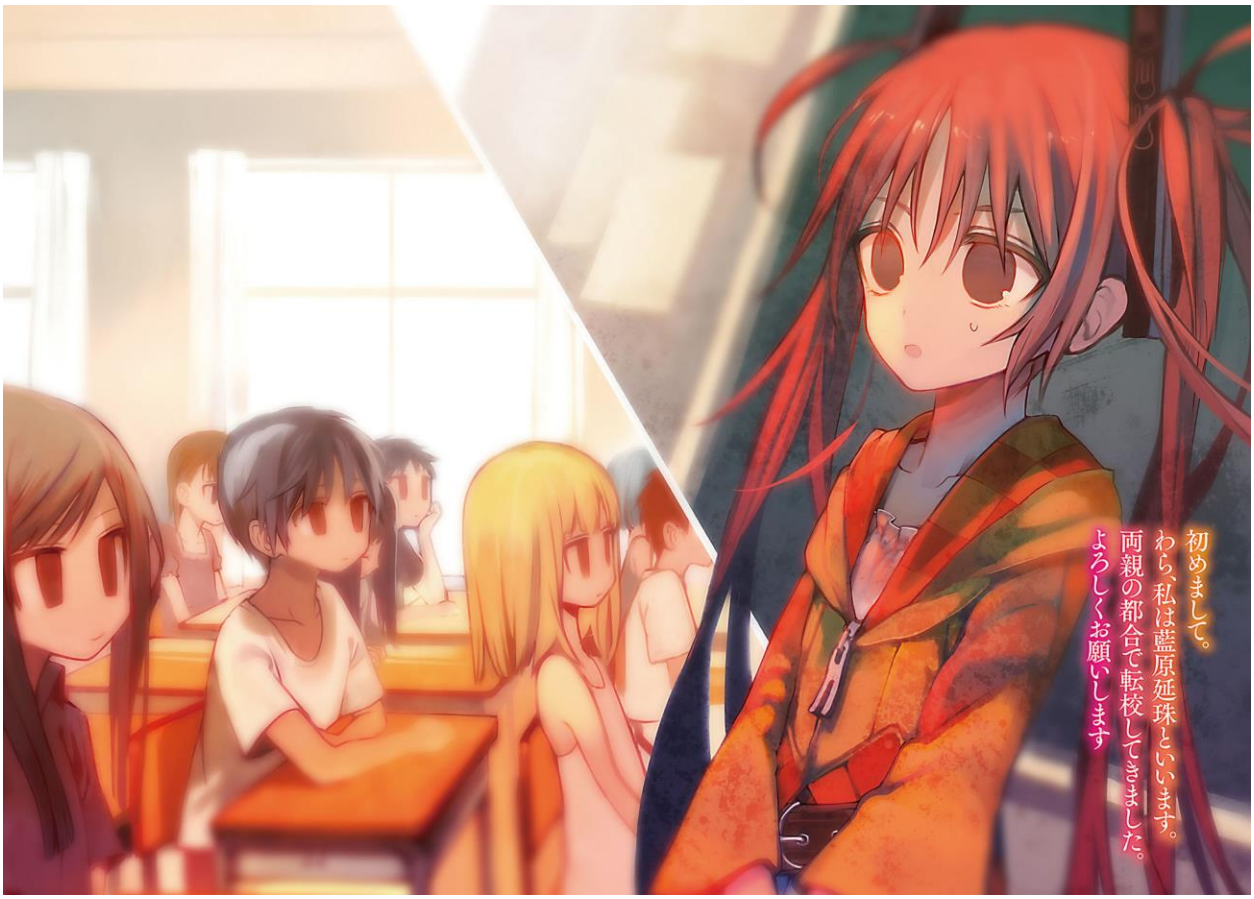
[黒の銃弾]
ブラック・ブレット
世界変革の銃弾
7
神崎紫電
Illustration
鵜飼沙樹


初めまして。
わら、私は藍原延珠といいます。
両親の都合で転校してきました。
よろしくお願いします

「その通りです」
「それでも、聖居に戻るつもりはないと？」

「きゃあああああああ！」
「えええええええええええっ!?」

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DESIGNED BY AFTERGLOW

ブラック・ブレット [黒の銃弾]

世界変革の銃弾

7

SHIDEN KANZAKI
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Prologue - The King of Pestilence

Clear and colorless liquid was flowing from the water fountain designed with a god figure. The pure water fell vertically, melding into the blue sky as splattering water droplets sent a refreshing breath into one's nose.

The maiden of pure white bent her knees gradually, removed her full-length glove and dipped her hand into the water.

The cold water felt especially refreshing in midsummer. At the bottom of the rippling water sat corroded one yen coins and rusted ten yen coins.

Turning her submerged wrist, she enjoyed playing in the water with child-like innocence, feeling as though all the dirt and dust of the mundane world were washing away. Unfortunately, this brief respite did not last long.

The sound of shoe soles against the stone-tiled floor could be heard from behind.

"It is time, Your Highness Seitenshi."

"Has the 'Head' and 'Solomon's Ring' been located, Honorable Kikunojyo?"

The Tokyo Area's head of state—Seitenshi—replied without looking back. The premier counselor behind her answered without any change in expression:

"The search is still in progress."

"Mr. Satomi is still uninformed regarding the matter?"

"On that point, I am personally opposed to entrusting the matter to him."

Seitenshi looked back while standing up, only to see the elderly white-bearded yet muscular gentlemen expressing anger through his dignified countenance.

"Would it be too untactful if I were to ask why?"

"That guy is merely a CivSec. Your Highness Seitenshi, you are entrusting important positions to him too much."

"Andrei Litvintsev's subordinates have already entered the Tokyo Area, isn't that right?"

"Indeed."

Seitenshi sighed.

"What a disaster-filled future."

"The summit meeting at hand is the first priority."

"..."

"Are you uninterested in it?"

Seitenshi kept her eyes closed for a while before opening them slowly.

"Let us be on our way."

Following Kikunojyo, she traversed the path of stepping stones. In front of the neatly mowed lawn and the trees, a rumbling wall of water appeared.

However, when Seitenshi stood right in front of the wall of water, the water ceased flowing to reveal a passage. This was achieved using a motion sensor, activating the entrance as soon as it sensed someone.

Passing through the cold and humid wayside pavilion and emerging from the other end's artificial waterfall, Seitenshi had to hold down her hat when a sudden gust of wind blew.

The grass swayed while the leaves rustled. Looking up at the sky from under her hat, Seitenshi saw a building with chalk walls, towering under the cloudless clear sky.

This was the Akasaka Palace, also known as the State Guest House.

Although it had been expanded and renovated after the Gastrea War, neither its yellow-gray color scheme of granite nor its symmetrical design had changed.

Walking past the security guards in black uniform who surrounded the building and entering from the front, one would be greeted by the magnificent interior decor that was like the Sacred Residence's. Under one person's lead, Seitenshi arrived at the main door to the White Phoenix Room.

"Here comes the critical moment."

"...Based on how things develop from this point onwards, the Tokyo Area's future may be altered."

Under the gloves, her palms were moist with sweat. Holding both hands against her chest, she felt an intense beating.

I must not be careless, Seitenshi reminded herself. Besides, every one of them was a sly old fox adept at setting traps for others.

She took a deep breath. She originally intended to push the door quietly but the door opened with an unexpectedly loud noise.

The talking in the room stopped while everyone shot their gazes at her.

This was the expected reaction, hence Seitenshi felt no fear.

Inside this room that imitated French style from the late eighteenth century, the silence was enough to prick the skin painfully.

The ceilings were painted with pictures while the curtains were threaded with gold. A spectacular chandelier, possibly weighing 800kg, was producing bright light capable of searing eyes.

Walking over to the table occupying the center of the room, Seitenshi sat down on the chair that Kikunojyo pulled out.

"Did you go flower picking, Your Highness Seitenshi?"

This was probably a sarcastic jab at her as a woman. Confronted with an opponent who would resort to jokes of such ill taste, Seitenshi found it even more necessary to work hard in order to main the calm expression on her face.

"Apologies for my tardy arrival, President Saitake. Please continue."

This man, whose face was as fierce as a lion's, was the Osaka Area's head of state—Sougen Saitake. After making a look of disappointment, he snorted with displeasure.

Seitenshi swept her gaze across the participants of the summit, all of them senior to her in age, sighing quietly at the distinguished lineup.

The Osaka Area's head of state, the Sendai Area's head of state, the Hakata Area's head of state and the Hokkaido Area's head of state were all present.

—A summit meeting between the five principal Areas.

Since there was no precedent, it was anyone's guess whether this could be called the Japanese version of the G5, but with the Tokyo Area as the chairing state, Seitenshi's responsibilities were definitely not light.

"In any case, there is the matter of the Japanese flag!"

The one who suddenly slammed the table and stood up should be the Hakata Area's—

"Prime Minister Kaihoku, may I ask what do you mean by that?"

Mildly suntanned skin with a wide lower jaw. His hair was speckled gray. With especially memorable thick eyebrows, Masamori Kaihoku, Prime Minister of the Hakata Area, spoke in a rage:

"Right now, the flag of Japan is the circle of the sun. But that red circle is easy to associate with the red eyes of Gastrea, which is why it isn't popular in my Area. So I'd like to use this chance to change the color, whether yellow or black or whatever, I don't care."

"In that case, choose black. As our nation is a producer of varanium, black is an excellent match."

The one who readily concurred was the newly elected prime minister of the Hokkaido Area, sitting next to him.

The prime minister of the Hokkaido Area played with his black-rimmed monocle every now and then. With clear traces of stubble remaining

around his lips, that elongated face looked like cockroach's when he smiled.

But back to the topic at hand, this was not an issue that Seitenshi could ignore given her position.

"Prime Minister Juujouji, there is definitely significance in the things our ancestors have protected. Please consider the meaning of tradition."

"Then the feelings of the citizens don't need to be considered?"

Seitenshi turned towards Kaihoku again.

"If memory serves me correctly, Prime Minister Kaihoku, your next election is imminent. But wouldn't capriciously catering to the whims of the citizens affect the integrity of the state?"

The Hakata Area's leader closed his half-opened mouth in shock, infuriated to the point of raising one of his eyebrows. Seitenshi noticed him cursing "this little bitch" under his breath.

Subjected to profanity despite her moral high ground, Seitenshi calmly replied "I am glad that you understand this principle."

It looked like she might actually get through this summit smoothly, surprisingly. The way she was now, she might be able to hold her own against these experienced politicians with the likes of Kaihoku or Juujouji.

At this moment, Saitake raised a bony hand, glanced around, and spoke gruffly.

"Well, I have another matter to raise. Regarding the Cassiopeia Project..."

Here it comes—Seitenshi immediately responded.

"On that note, I wish to advance the project as much as possible."

The Cassiopeia Project was a proposal to link the five Areas of Japan using shield machines to dig tunnels for a massive subterranean rail network. It was the mainstay of Seitenshi's policy and also her ambition, a wish that she hoped to actualize no matter what.

Gazing at everyone's face in turn, Seitenshi spoke sonorously:

"Once the underground rail starts running, not only will economic activity be stimulated but it will also serve as proof that the five Areas are coexisting in peace and prosperity. In addition, it can serve as the signal for humanity to counterattack the Gastrea, bringing substantial hope to the citizens of the various Areas."

"However, I am opposed to it..."

Seitenshi felt a chill down her spine.

The one who murmured to interrupt this conversation was the Sendai Area's prime minister who had kept silent until now.

His hair, facial hair and even his eyebrows were snow-white in color. The hairline had receded so far that the only remnants were around the ears. Severely balded, his head was smooth and shiny. The pair of tiny eyes under that wide forehead made him look like a gorilla, meanwhile exhibiting an intense light of suspicion.

Seitenshi subconsciously straightened her back.

Sougen Saitake, suspected of hiring the assassin who had made attempts on her life. Masamori Kaihoku, inferior in comparison to

Saitake but conspicuous in his radical and offensive comments. Tsukihiko Juujouji, whose abilities as a head of state were yet unproven. Just these three alone were difficult enough to handle already, but in fact, Seitenshi believed that sole candidate for the eye of the storm in this summit would perhaps be Muramaro Inou, prime minister of the Sendai Area.

Inou muttered every single word pretentiously.

"I believe this proposal is far too unrealistic. Has Your Highness any idea exactly how expensive and time consuming this construction project will be? Perhaps it might be fine for Your Highness Seitenshi, but by the time of the completion ceremony, the rest of us will be too old to move."

These words sounded like an attempt of a joke, but amidst the stiff atmosphere, it ended with a cold reception.

"Prime Minister Inou, perhaps you may not know, but technology is constantly making advances. Suppose both the Tokyo and Sendai Areas use shield tunneling machines, the two Areas could become interlinked in the near future."

"Yes... However."

Inou scratched his head gravely. Just as Seitenshi feared, he did not agree.

Once the five Areas became interconnected through underground railways, the cost of transport would drop dramatically. The Hokkaido Area's cheap agricultural products, the manufactured products of the Osaka Area which specialized in heavy industries, as well as raw

varanium from the world's biggest varanium exporter, the Tokyo Area, would out-compete all the other Areas' own domestic products.

The Sendai Area's agricultural and industrial communities must have applied pressure while the think tank on which Inou relied surely wanted him to move towards protecting existing interests.

Seitenshi could not help but feel a wave of irony.

Merely ten years earlier, Japan was still a unified country but now, in the year 2031, one could hardly describe the Japanese people as of one heart.

No matter what, Seitenshi wanted to accomplish the reunification of the five Areas within her lifetime, so as to revive the nation of Japan. However, the greatest obstacle to this goal may very well not be the Gastrea at all.

Perhaps Inou's prior assumption could be said to have come true? The Cassiopeia Project could not reach an agreement and ended up shelved.

Although the other four had cited "deciding everything during this conference would be too early" as a reason, declaring they would bring the proposal back to their respective states for discussion, seeing as they could not reach a conclusion despite holding the power to decide, who else could approve the project?

Once other issues on the agenda including economic and energy matters and a brief discussion of global warming had been covered, Inou raised another issue by saying "by the way" as an opening line after keeping silent the whole time.

—Perhaps he was trying to target the moment when Seitenshi's guard was lowered.

"Your Highness Seitensnhi, about the Tokyo Area's 'Legacy of Seven Stars.'"

Seitenshi stared wide-eyed, exchanging glances with Kikunojyo who was standing beside her.

"How did you come to know about the Legacy?"

Inou made a sinister smile.

"We do have the likes of intelligence agencies over here after all. Although I find it to be a ridiculous notion, according to information that has come into my possession, by using a mysterious object called the 'Legacy of Seven Stars' as a catalyst, the Tokyo Area is capable of summoning Stage V Gastrea—in other words, the Zodiac Gastrea. This wouldn't be true, would it?"

"No comment."

Seitenshi replied without pretense. However, the depths of Inou's eyes flashed with suspicion.

"What's with Your Highness? If what I just brought up was utterly ridiculous, feel free to dismiss it with a laugh."

"No comment."

"Oh dear, despite lobbying for cooperation between the five Areas, Your Highness is hiding things from everyone else."

Seitenshi did not know how to answer.

The conference's atmosphere was brewing into an interrogation, making Seitenshi feel very worried.

"I am truly sorry but this concerns the confidential matters of the Tokyo Area."

Ending the subject on her own, Seitenshi lost the ability to think calmly, not even bothering to slightly ease the tense atmosphere at the scene.

Without pursuing this matter further on the spot, the summit meeting ended, unable to reach a compromise.

—The result of this slight dispute between two leaders would develop into an incident that would shake the entire world a few days later.

"Don't stop working, hurry and get back to your posts!"

Urged by the foreman's scolding, echoing inside the cavern, Hitoshi Kamisu was holding a rock drill's hand grip, pushing the hard chisel against the ground.

Pressing the throttle lever, the compressed air sent into the rock drill drove the chisel, shattering the bedrock beneath. A suffocating smell of soil and the intense reaction force on the arms was making him close one eye.

The hot and humid air was causing an extremely high humidex, forcing Hitoshi to release the hand grip on several occasions to wipe the sweat off his brow.

Under the faint illumination from naked incandescent bulbs, other men were wielding rock drills like him with extremely frightened faces while moving the shattered rock onto the conveyor belt.

Inside the dark cavern, it was impossible to tell whether it was day or night, even.

To Hitoshi, this kind of environment was like having one's entire life falling into a trap dug by an antlion.

Hitoshi's location was outside the Monoliths, in other words, a varanium mine in "unexplored territory."

The Gastrea War broke out in 2021. Working in the import industry and selling foreign cosmetics for a living, Hitoshi became unemployed with the arrival of war.

After war, the law mandated that civilian aircraft were obliged to hire CivSec escort planes for protection when outside the Monoliths, where Gastrea roamed everywhere, so as to avoid attacks from avian or flying insect Gastrea. The costs of air transport rose dramatically ever since, thus collapsing the ratio of risk and reward in the import trade.

Hitoshi recalled from his school days what his teacher had said: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." He remembered this was supposed to be a famous quote from Darwin.

In that sense, the world that had gone through massive changes since the Gastrea War was not a place he could adapt to after all.

Although his personal savings were enough for him to make a new start, he had lost the will to fight. Compared to taking the challenge courageously and accepting defeat, he chose to live on his savings instead.

After ten years, naturally, his money ran out.

Taken away, almost in the form of kidnapping, by the ruffians employed by his creditors, Hitoshi's life as miner began.

This work was inordinarily monotonous without any hope for the future.

His workplace, B3F, was reached by going down on the elevator known as the cage. This place was not only dark but also grew narrower the

deeper one went. The steel bars supporting the ceiling also felt very insecure.

Although modern technology had advanced and his co-workers had said that collapsing accidents were less common than in the past, it was quite doubtful to what extent this so-called technology could be trusted given that this was an illegal mine run by a yakuza front company.

After being noisily woken up and eating the disgusting breakfast, they had to work straight until the middle of the night before returning to and collapsing on those coarse blankets.

Stuff for showing time such as watches or cellphones had been confiscated first thing, so it was impossible to say accurately how long he had to work for, but Hitoshi's biological clock had a feeling it was roughly thirteen to fourteen hours.

Most unbearable of all, digging out an ounce of varanium required using the rock drill to smash a hundred kilograms of rock in desperation.

Due to the Gastrea's violent growls, he would jump up in the middle of the night from fear, roused from bed. This had happened many times, not just once or twice.

Although civil security was posted at the mine twenty-four hours a day, the CivSec officers found by the yakuza were not savory characters either, presumably birds of a feather, flocking together. Their responsibilities probably leaned more towards monitoring workers to prevent them from escaping.

In addition, all the miners already understood that these guys, hired by money, were absolutely not going to risk their own lives to protect the workers in the event of strong Gastrea attacking.

"Hey! How many times do I need to say until it gets through your thick skull, don't stop working!"

Hitoshi clicked his tongue lightly and went back to work.

At this moment, there was a thud and heavy vibration. The light bulb instantly blinked while dirt fell and scattered from the ceiling.

The miners' unease was spreading like a ripple.

Hitoshi originally thought it was the use of mining explosives but with another thud, dirt fell from above again.

With cold sweat dripping slowly, he also felt his heart beating intensely.

Hitoshi had a very ominous feeling.

The intermittent sound was gradually getting louder. By the seventh time, it could be called a strong shaking already. Losing his balance, Hitoshi fell on the ground and sprained his back.

The noise was getting closer and closer.

Indeed, this almost felt like—

"The footsteps of something...?"

Hitoshi could not help but mutter. These words were like the seeds of unrest in his heart.

Soon, these seeds sprouted and vines of fear entangled his entire body.

"Hurry and run!"

By the time someone yelled out, people had already started taking action.

Although the foremen were roaring acutely, desperately trying to make everyone go back, having a disadvantage in numbers, they could not possibly stop the tide of men after all.

Packed full of miners almost to the point of overloading, the elevator moved sluggishly with the sound of metallic friction.

Crushed by the fear of the ceiling that might collapse any moment, the burly men working in the mines kept shaking nonstop.

What was happening? What the heck was going on?

Finally reaching the surface, the group violently pushed the fence's door open.

They hastily climbed up and looked out from the windows of tower cranes.

The harsh sunlight made them groan. It was apparently daytime right now.

However, in the next instant, the sun was blotted out and the sky suddenly grew dark.

Unable to understand what was going on, they looked up in the sky.

—Then they saw that.

A size on a scale that would make people go crazy—That was the only way to describe it.

Looking out at that thing from a tower crane, it could see a writhing mass of flesh with slow and gentle undulations. The two sides of its body were lined with countless bristled legs with shiny surfaces.

Hitoshi's view was dominated by that thing to such an extent that it was meaningless to describe how enormous its appearance was exactly.

That thing's long body was enough to mistake for the Great Wall of China, an annelid looking like a leech or an earthworm at first glance. The lengthy body was raised into the air while the long limbs lowered to the ground were divided into segments, of which the longest and thickest were the scythe-like forelimbs.

This super Gastrea, climbing the mine using contracting pereiopods, just happened to step over the tower crane where Hitoshi was watching from.

Hence the sun was blotted out. The terrifying body part the miners first saw was precisely the Gastrea's belly.

Screams and roars turned into a chain reaction. The guarding CivSecs scattered and fled, unsure whether to run or simply abandon the mine completely.

With every step the Gastrea took, its underbelly would struck the ground with a thud followed by a delayed vibration, sweeping up clouds of dust while easily flattening a miniature mobile monolith.

At this moment, a large number of bag-like objects lined on the Gastrea's lower abdomen entered Hitoshi's view.

Looking like eggs at first glance, it matched his distant memories.

"Virus sacs? How could this... no way..."

Hitoshi groaned and stepped back.

A king of the Gastrea, a Zodiac Gastrea—

"—It's Libra, the King of Pestilence...!"

No mistake, this was one of the Zodiac Gastrea that had viciously ravaged the world ten years ago.

By the time the news reached the political center of the Tokyo Area's first ward—the Sacred Residence—it was already two hours after the commotion at the mine.

Seitenshi's office for handling administrative matters, located in the Residence's west tower, was filled with a tense atmosphere while staff was running around to seek confirmation reports and take appropriate countermeasures.

"Hence, Libra has halted its march at that particular mine. What is the mine's location?"

Sitting in the massive executive chair, Seitenshi tried to speak calmly while resting her elbows on the desk.

Without changing the expression on his poker face, Kikunojyo waved his hand. The room's lighting immediately dimmed and a giant holopanel appeared in midair to indicate the map.

The marker was situated in the vast "unexplored territory" between the Tokyo and Sendai Areas.

"This is the vicinity of what used to be called Nasudake in the Tochigi Prefecture ten years ago. Since there were no records of applications to the state for mining permission, it must be an illegal mine."

Seitenshi stared intently at the glowing holopanel in the dark.

"...The location where Libra surfaced happens to be right in the middle between the Areas of Tokyo and Sendai. What is its current status?"

"Currently coiled up directly above the mine, literally in a spiral."

"Has it ceased activity?"

Kikunojyo shook its head.

"That is uncertain."

"I recall Libra's ability being—"

"—Synthesizing within itself tens of thousands of lethal viruses that only make their host in humans and spreading them in the air. These viruses will invade the body not only through breathing but even just by skin contact. Hence, the only way to prevent infection by Libra's viruses is to rely on the latest protective suits. Apart from that, the lethal viruses synthesized by Libra are immune to ultraviolet light and can even pass through the magnetic fields of Monoliths. Russia was practically turned into hell when Libra passed through ten years ago. People infected with all sorts of strange diseases, never seen before, were piled up in the streets in pain, their stench reportedly reaching as far as Beijing."

"—Hence that is how he acquired the moniker of the 'King of Pestilence'... Isn't that right? What is the state of those virus sacs located on Libra's abdomen?"

"They have already activated."

"Please ask the analysis team to determine when the viruses will be released."

"Affirmative. However, considering Libra's ability, the people of the Sendai Area ought to be panicking more than us right now."

"How so?"

"A westerly wind is blowing at the moment."

Seitenshi covered her mouth in a sudden realization.

"You evidently understood. Suppose Libra were to release the viruses from that location, although it would still depend on weather conditions, but there is a 80-90% chance that the wind will blow straight into the Sendai Area."

"The chances of defeating Zodiac Gastrea with conventional weaponry is almost zero. I hope the Sendai Area won't panic to the extent of firing missiles to aggravate Libra."

Seitenshi looked at the policy secretary standing by on the side.

"Please inform Prime Minister Inou that 'The Tokyo Area expects the Sendai Area to show wise judgment.'"

"Oh no!"

At this moment, another secretary rushed in out of breath, pushing the door open with his body.

"What is the matter?"

"Prime Minister Inou has occupied the Tokyo embassy in the Sendai Area and arrested all the staff! They have also sealed the airport, stopping all flights to the Tokyo Area!"

Feeling a shock as though someone had struck the side of her face with a hammer, Seitenshi could not help but stand up forcefully, causing her chair to make a noise.

"What is... the meaning of this?"

"The other side seems to believe that the Legacy of Seven Stars in our hands has summoned Libra to the mine in an attempt to destroy the Sendai Area, hence they have repeatedly asked us to make Libra leave. It's on the television right now, please hurry and watch it, Your Highness!"

Waving his hands without any sense of self, the secretary called out another holopanel, without needing to change channels to show Prime Minister Inou standing on a stage, delivering an intense speech with a clenched fist:

'Citizens! Ten years ago, the Sendai Area was devastated by the Gastrea War and under everyone's efforts and sacrifice, we have revived and are currently recognized by the United Nations as an independent state, this is public knowledge. However, there is currently an enemy that threatens the perpetuity of our nation's sovereignty.'

Prime Minister Inou's eyes, hidden under bulging fat suddenly glared and widened as he punched the lectern.

'And that is the Tokyo Area! Our intelligence agency has uncovered the truth that the Tokyo Area is hiding technology to control Zodiac Gastrea arbitrarily.'

"Liar! The Legacy has no power of that sort at all."

Even knowing that this outburst was meaningless, Seitenshi could not help but cry out.

'In other words, the calamity of destruction that Libra is bringing to the Sendai Area is completely the result of the Tokyo Area's doing. No matter what the Tokyo Area's intentions may be, clearly they have crossed the line. To eliminate the threat of Libra, we have no choice but to retaliate against the Seitenshi administration. I request all citizens of the Sendai Area to—'

This too much to bear.

Waving her hand to shut off the screen, Seitenshi looked down and shook her head.

The office was plunged into deathly silence.

—Full-scale war between Areas.

She realized that these were the words surfacing in everyone's mind.

In the end, she finally looked up with a feeble expression. All staff stared at her. They were awaiting orders.

Holding the rosary in front of her chest tightly, only that solid sensation could soothe Seitenshi's soul amidst her feelings of setback.

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled.

"Regarding this accusation, we should issue a denial statement immediately."

"Will the other side believe us?"

"The later it is sent out, the more it makes the Tokyo Area look culpable. Apart from that, we should still send an emissary secretly to the Sendai Area."

One of the secretaries looked fearfully at this moment.

"How about we take this opportunity to publicize the matter of the Legacy to the other states?"

"Even if we release the Legacy's information to the other four Areas completely, I am skeptical that they will use it peacefully. Furthermore, now that the situation has deteriorated to this point, it is impossible to hope for the Sendai Area's trust in us. The best solution is for us to eliminate Libra using our own power."

A very intellectual-looking secretary pushed up his glasses with a middle finger, his gaze resting on the associated documents.

"Frankly speaking, it ought to have been done ten years ago if it were possible. Gathering DNA from hundreds of thousands of species then further evolving them, Libra's layered carapace is capable of deflecting all kinds of modern weapons. If there is one effective method of attack, it would only be nuclear..."

"No."

Seitenshi rejected before the secretary finished.

"Although it has become "unexplored territory," using nuclear weapons on former Japanese soil would contravene the Shinsakai Treaty."

At this point, an analyst entered the office with an "excuse me" and whispered to one of the secretaries. After listening, the secretary nodded.

"The analysis results are out. Judging from the current maturation speed of the virus sacs, the release of viruses will be five days later. In addition, the Sendai Area has issued an ultimatum to attack the Tokyo Area if Libra is not evicted in four days."

"Four days..."

Seitenshi felt the sound of a second hand representing the countdown inside her mind.

"Immediately negotiate the path to peace with the other side and try to find a way to eliminate Libra. At this rate, the world will only fill up with hatred."

"Your Highness Seitenshi..."

She looked back to see Kikunojyo, who had remained arms crossed with eyes closed earlier, opening his eyes.

His eyes were flashing with terrifyingly cold light.

"We should immediately barricade the Sendai Area's embassy in retaliation."

Seitenshi shook her head calmly.

"No. Hatred only leads to more hatred. This chain reaction will extend all the way to hell. Besides, this incident could very well be secretly related to Solomon's Ring and the Head..."

"By this point, it is meaningless to discuss that!"

The counselor dressed in a white kimono shouted loudly. Instantly, the staff all froze and the room was shrouded in silence.

After a while, he continued talking in a low and clear voice:

"Your Highness Seitenshi, those Sendai guys are using the innocent staff at the Tokyo Area embassy as hostages and even pointing their missiles at us. I fear that the citizens of the Tokyo Area have angered too and public opinion will necessarily tilt towards war. If you don't take any measures of resistance, you will be accused of weakness by the citizens and be forced to abdicate."

"I do not care. I will gladly accept it if that is the decision of the citizens."

"Apart from you, who else can serve as the Tokyo Area's symbol? In the long run, it is actually good for the Tokyo Area if you cling desperately to the throne and refuse to let go of power sometimes. Why can't you understand this principle?"

"Only this once, I will not listen to your suggestion no matter what."

Just as Seitenshi took a breath to dismiss Kikunojyo and issue orders to the secretaries, he suddenly reached out to interrupt her.

"Absolutely not."

He raised his chin in a gesture. Two burly men dressed in black immediately barged into the room to flank Seitenshi on both sides.

For a moment, she failed to understand his intent.

"...What is this?"

"Your Highness Seitenshi, please return to your room to rest for now."

Seitenshi finally understood the meaning of the grim expression on Kikunojyo's face.

"...In other words, this is a coup d'etat?"

Kikunojyo's eyebrows drooped as he showed a sorrowful expression for the first time.

"During 1962's Cuban Missile Crisis, America and the USSR were aiming nuclear weapons at each, sufficient to destroy the world seven times over, with their hands on the launch buttons. Although the USSR's leader Khrushchev's decision to accept negotiations with the USA and avoid full-scale nuclear war was correct, the people regarded it as weakness on his part and it became the reason for his removal from power later on. Please remember this, Your Highness. Sometimes, correct decisions will be viewed as sins. The previous Seitenshi tasked me with the responsibility of never letting you fall from power. This is the only reason why I am clinging to this post as counselor with these old bones of mine."

"Shameless! Trying to solve everything with brute force!"

"No one can question whether decisiveness is good or evil, not even the history books."

"In that case, let judgment be revealed when it is time for the dead to rise from their graves, to be selected for heaven or for hell."

"I don't care. Let me be the one to go to hell. Take Her Highness away."

Faced with the men in black who were about to raise her by the arms, Seitenshi sternly declared "I can walk on my own." Then after staring into Kikunojyo's face for a long while, she finally turned around and left the office.

The light of a three-pronged candlestick wavered warmly in front of her, slowly turning the corridor occupied by darkness back into a world ruled by sanity and rationality.

She hated the Sacred Residence at night, especially the parts where there were no people.

The only female policy secretary—Kiyomi Kase—was walking forward with stumbling footsteps.

The portrait of a beauty, done by a famous painter, looked like it was secretly holding its breath today, peering at her from behind.

Having busied for a whole week already, the policy secretaries were facing a workload today that was almost enough to overturn the entire Sacred Residence.

Looking out the window at the lighting in the west tower that was still visible, one could guess that these lights were not going to extinguish tonight.

In contrast, the corner of Seitenshi's bedroom located in the west tower felt like some kind of inviolable sanctuary. Apart from those looking after Seitenshi, very few people visited.

Kiyomi carried a tray on her left hand with steaming soup and bread. Seitenshi was currently under house arrest, even confined to her own room. Kiyomi had delivered meals a number of times but Seitenshi had shown no signs of eating at all.

Driving away notions that she must convince Her Highness to eat something, Kiyomi walked over to the door in the depths of the passage. Putting down the candlestick, she knocked a few times.

"Your Highness Seitenshi, I'm sorry for disturbing you this late at night."

Staring at the curving decorations of the door, which resembled vines, only the silence of rejection responded to Kiyomi.

Knocking again, she still received no response.

Just as she sighed and was about to turn back, she suddenly felt wind blowing out of the keyhole. Hence she placed her palm there and waved a few times.

Not her imagination.

For some reason, she had a bad feeling. After saying "pardon my intrusion," she inserted the spare key, turned anxiously and rushed inside.

The dark interior of the room was deserted. The canopy bed was also empty.

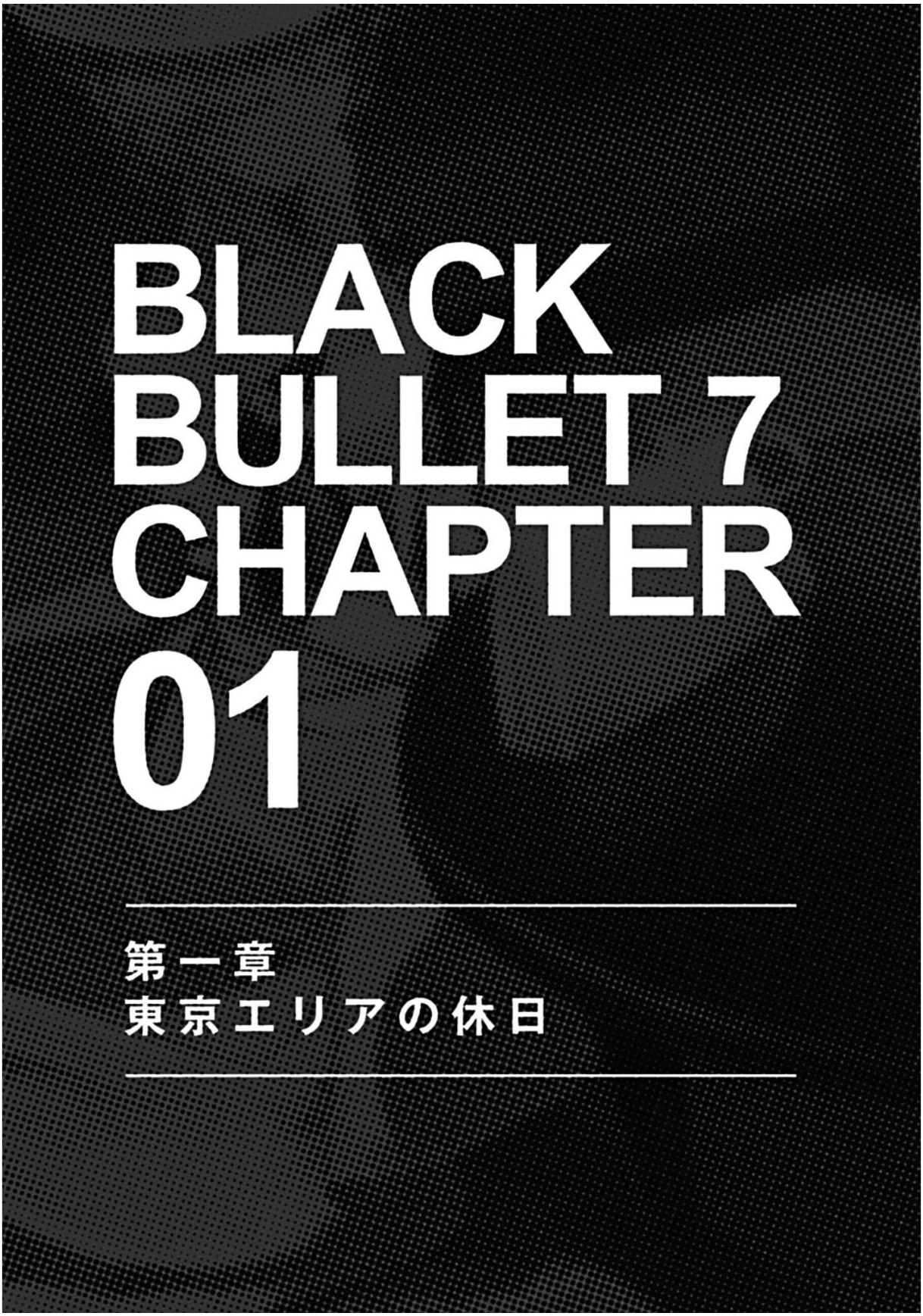
The wind was blowing in, making the silken curtains sway. The curtain on the right side of the window seemed to have been taken down. Strangely enough, the removed curtain could not be found anywhere.

When Kiyomi raised the candlestick and approached the balcony, all doubts were erased.

The curtain was tied to the balcony's railing, fluttering lightly in the wind. Torn apart, the curtain's pieces were tied together to make a rope, hanging over from the third floor to reach the ground floor.

Realizing what this meant, Kiyomi dropped the candlestick in her hand to cover her mouth with both hands.

"Oh no...!"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BULLET 7
CHAPTER
01
第一章
東京エリアの休日

Chapter 1 - Tokyo Area's Holiday

Part 1

The edge of the sky was just beginning to glow as dawn's light blue color sternly made the atmosphere grow tense. With last night's rain accumulated on the road surface, trees were moistened while flowers and grass beneath were nourished.

To the young man—Rentaro Satomi—this scene prior to going to school was especially nervous.

Perhaps it was the twintailed girl ahead, looking back at him, whose nervous emotions were infecting him.

Enju Aihara's hands were tightly gripping the straps of the bright red grade schooler's backpack.

"I shall be setting off now."

Rentaro placed his hands on Enju's shoulders.

"Before that, let's confirm a few things, Enju. You must absolutely refrain from using your power, sit out of PE class, and if you accidentally get hurt—"

"'Hurry and press your hand over the injured part and run over to somewhere without people, to prevent others from seeing the wound regenerate no matter what.' Isn't that right? I have grown tired of hearing it."

"Yeah... I guess."

While wondering if he had reminded her that many times, Rentaro scratched his head. On the other hand, Enju was showing a confident expression, saying "this time I am really setting off," swaying her twintails while raising her hand vertically.

Although Rentaro remained worried, knowing Enju had made her mind, he could not keep her any longer.

He had no idea if Enju understood his worries but he watched as she disappeared into the morning mist without looking back.

"She left already?"

Rentaro looked behind him at the dojo's main entrance where a beauty dressed in a black sailor-style school uniform was emerging, as well as the blue-eyed blonde beside her. They had apparently just finished their morning training. Kisara Tendo was wiping the sweat off her red-flushed face with a towel.

"Are you worried about her?"

"Not exactly..."

Rentaro looked again towards the road where Enju had left.

"But on that note, I never expected her to have the perseverance to still go to school."

Kisara smiled with full understanding and glanced at him sideways.

"Because humans cannot live their lives alone."

Rentaro pouted.

"What, aren't I by her side too?"

Despite putting on a brave front, on Enju's first day attending a new elementary school, an occasion to celebrate, Rentaro noticed he was unable to share Enju's joy in an honest manner.

Ultimately, was it really worth celebrating the fact that the dust had been wiped off the abandoned schoolbag in a corner of the apartment?

Enju had been expelled from school due to her identity as a Cursed Child. After that, the open-air classroom had even met an even more tragic fate.

Feared and cursed by people, Enju was fully entitled to lamenting her own misfortune and wallowing in negative emotions. However, she did not do that.

Rentaro did not think that his guidance was what achieved this. It was due to Enju's inborn strength of spirit. If he had anything to be proud of, it was simply helping her to bring out her good side.

Seeing nearby schools all refuse to enroll Enju, he had no choice but to find this elementary school far from home.

This was the reason why Enju had to get up early in the morning to commute to school on her own.

"Tina, what are your plans?"

Rentaro asked the blonde girl next to him. She was also looking in the direction where Enju had disappeared.

"Please let me think more about it, including the fact whether I really need to go to school."

"....."

The girl before him had already figured things out. Ever since the calamity ten years ago, in this world that was slowly approaching destruction, it was questionable whether pursuing the usual steps, taken for granted matter-of-factly, of completing school and getting a job was really correct.

If anything, it would be closer to the sense of emptiness carried by members of the Lost Generation like himself or Kisara as though it was their fate.

At this time, a low rumbling came from somewhere, making Rentaro halt in his movements.

By the time he realized it was the sound of an airplane, Rentaro recognized the small dot of light in the western sky.

The rumbling grew louder as the dot of light gradually grew bigger. With a sudden great noise, the plane swept past with supersonic speed. Then a moment later, a gale blew, forcing Rentaro to cover his face hastily.

The surrounding trees also quivered. Rentaro looked up to see torn leaves fluttering all around in the surroundings. Taking a closer look, he found the dot of light just now had flown far away, impossible to see unless he stared intently.

"Seriously, why would a plane have an emergency takeoff so early in the morning?"

Spitting out the leaves that had entered her mouth, Kisara grumbled.

"That's one of the Tokyo Area's support fighter jets, right? Weren't almost all of them shot down during the Third Kantou Battle?"

"They apparently built more through emergency production. Right now things are still okay with both sides in a staring contest, but the gap in combat potential between us and the Sendai Area remains difficult to compensate for. As soon as war breaks out, it will be very disadvantageous for our side."

"...Will a war really start?"

Seeing Tina look down in worry, Rentaro instantly wanted to comfort her and say there will always be a solution, but fell silent before he could speak.

Only this once, Rentaro could not even see where things were developing towards either.

"She did not inform you this time, Satomi."

Rentaro snorted in response to Kisara's slight disappointment.

"Why do I need to be mentioned? A conflict between states is no place for CivSecs to enter the stage."

"That may be true but you've always gotten yourself caught up in similar affairs."

"Unlike the Third Kantou Battle, this situation is too complicated. Rather than CivSecs, what we really need to mobilize is an ambassador adept at negotiations."

Raising his arms in a surrendering gesture, Rentaro instantly felt a chill in his palms.

The sun happened to peek out from behind the clouds in the east, its rays shining bright on the ground.

As though reminding Rentaro to pay attention, Kisara clapped her hands.

"It is precisely during times like these that we must carefully protect our everyday lives. Let's go. If we don't hurry up and get ready, we'll be late to school."

Part 2

To Enju Aihara, this place had a different atmosphere compared to Magata Elementary School and the open-air classroom.

She had heard previously that this was an elite school. Enju wondered if this was the reason, but felt unconvinced.

Due to her Gastrea factor, Enju's sense of smell was keener than a normal human's. While walking through the corridor, she sensed a strong smell of adrenalin creep into her nose.

This place was filled with terror and nervousness.

This impression remained unchanged even when she entered the staff room to meet the teacher.

Calling herself Yagara, the middle-aged teacher had such deep smile lines that Enju wondered if she could poke a finger into them. When smiling, those lines became even deeper and more obvious. However, her thick lips were unnaturally large while in contrast, her eyes were tiny, giving a very cold impression.

Not the kind of teacher whom students would feel comfortable approaching to discuss private matters.

After listening to simple explanations and when the bell rang for homeroom, Enju was taken to the Year 4 Class 5 classroom where she made her self-introduction.

Although Enju's legal guardian always called her careless and insensitive, she still felt her back stiffen from nearly forty pairs of eyes staring at her.

"Hello everyone, I am... I'm Enju Aihara. I transferred here because of my parents. Please to meet you all."

After condensing the prepared greeting so that it was short enough to avoid mistakes and taking a bow, Enju was assigned to a seat apparently prepared for her on the last row next to the window.

She heard people whispering between themselves. "A transfer student at this kind of time." Indeed, coming across the Libra crisis during transferring could only be considered a great misfortune.

Not particularly interested in Enju, Ms. Yagara reminded them "okay everyone, despite the times we're in, please do try to get along" thus ending the extremely ordinary self-introduction.

At this moment, a lively-looking boy sitting in the front row yelled "teacher!" and raised his hand to ask:

"Funagasaki Elementary nearby has stopped their lessons. Why do we still have to go to school?"

Although no one nodded, all the classmates were showing silent agreement.

Yagara smiled lightly and said:

"Your parents have entrusted our school to nurture you all into amazing people. None of your parents want you to fall behind in the curriculum."

Although the teacher's tone was calm, there was a commanding attitude to her.

The classroom's atmosphere immediately changed. Yagara organized the class register on the lectern and said "although it's very sudden" to change the subject, but at this moment...

All the students' faces went tense and they shut their mouths completely.

This tension was very uncomfortable. This was also the smell of adrenalin from earlier. Compared to the boys, the girls' nervousness was overwhelmingly higher.

Enju looked at Yagara at the lectern to see her lips curling up coldly, showing sadistic glee in her expression.

"Today, I have important news for everyone. Miss Kamo from Class 2 has been expelled after the staff meeting made a decision. She will be handed over to the IISO. This is the fate most befitting carriers of the Gastrea virus."

Enju instantly tensed up, breaking out in with tons of cold sweat all over.

"Thus a viral carrier is eliminated. I hope everyone will be good students from now on. That's all. Oh right, although I'm sorry to have to tell you so soon after you transferred, Miss Aihara, we will be going on

a school trip to a power plant in an outskirt zone the day after tomorrow. Please decide on your group within today."

Saying that, the teacher left the classroom, her high heels clacking away.

It was time for the brief break after class. Amidst the noisy chattering, Enju forgot to wipe her dripping sweat, simply looking down, clutching her knees hard with her fingernails digging in.

She felt she was already dead.

"Ms. Yagara is a bit neurotic, so don't feel too concerned."

Enju looked to the side, startled. A girl was standing there. She was dressed in a border with a short jacket, standing there elegantly like a retro actress.

Perhaps due to feeling nervous, the girl kept rubbing her hand against the back of her thigh.

She had short curly bob cut with something resembling a wry smile on her face. Although it looked like the girl was trying hard to act in a way not to arouse wariness, it also meant that she was very shy.

The girl timidly pointed at Enju's desk.

"Miss Aihara, that's..."

Following her gaze, Enju saw the laptop she was using for class, which was covered all over with Tenchuu Girls stickers.

As though resolving herself, the girl brought her hands out from behind her back and raised them before Enju's eyes.

This was her tablet computer. When Enju looked at the modular back panel, she instantly widened her eyes.

"Th-That's! The limited edition Tenchuu Red special multicolored back cover offered to subscribers of Girls' Dreams monthly magazine!"

Taking a closer look, Enju found that even the stylus was a Tenchuu Girls related product.

Who could this be? Thinking that, Enju re-examined the girl. The girl went "ehehe" and smiled for finding a fellow fan, then shook the tablet noisily.

"Eh—No way! So you commute all the way from Magata City?"

"Mm-hmm, it takes an hour and a half to get here by train."

Enju wolfed down the hot dog bun from the school lunch while the girl with curly hair looked down while curling fried noodles around her fork.

"I see—Because of your parents. It must be tough for you. This is an elite school after all, so there's a lot of homework."

"Oh."

"Yes. Ah, especially be careful of Mr. Katakura who teaches science class. He always gives hard questions on purpose to test the poorer students."

So that kind of teacher exists in every school—Seeing Enju cross her arms and mutter like that, the girl giggled.

By the lunch break, Enju and the girl were already great friends.

From Enju's standpoint, she could not be luckier to have a kindhearted classmate at school who could remind her of rules and things to pay attention to.

This girl with the curly bob cut was named Momoka Hieda. By this point, Enju and Momoka were already close enough to address each other by first name directly.

"Oh, my home happens to be in the train station's direction. Uh, if it's okay with you, can we go home together after school?"

"Mm-hmm, of course it's fine."

Momoka clapped her hands together, smiling while she said "Really, I'm so glad" quietly. This girl was so cute. Enju analyzed her while wondering if she was Rentaro's type, but could not ignore the fact that Momoka's personality differed from hers by a lot.

"Umm, Momoka, umm... What was actually going on?"

Finding an opportunity, Enju asked a question that had been weighing on her mind.

"Which?"

"Umm, that. The expelled girl we were told about this morning."

Probably guessing what Enju wanted to say, Momoka smiled wryly and said:

"That kind of tense atmosphere was really unpleasant, right? But the school has been pushing a trend of encouraging informants, with Ms. Yagara as a major proponent."

"Uh, so that Miss Kamo who got expelled was... a so-called Cursed Child?"

The girl shook her head in a dilemma.

"I'm not sure."

Enju stared wide-eyed.

"Not sure?"

"Our school is kind of special. In fact, it doesn't matter whether someone is a Cursed Child or not, as long as they are suspected, they will be taken to the IISO. Even if the IISO comes back with negative test results, almost everyone finds it impossible to continue staying in the school after being suspected once... According to rumors, students unwanted by the school will be accused forcibly and sent to the IISO."

I see, so that's why the atmosphere in the class—especially the girls—was that tense.

Enju recalled what Rentaro had said before. The school had some kind of conservative thing going and could easily turn into a hotbed for a peculiar environment, which most likely referred to this.

Unaware of Enju's speechlessness, the girl before her said cheerfully, perhaps trying to drive away the tense mood:

"We can't possibly be one of those 'red-eyes', ahaha."

Enju could only smile awkwardly to cover things up.

"Hey! So in Tenchuu Girls' Episode 13 'Population Explosion! The Terrifying Pond Algae,' it mentioned about catching the lord of the lake, the Carp King, it's not made up?"

"Apparently for realism, the staff actually went and caught one."

"Then in the second season, Episode 21's 'Waiting for Godot,' what was that all about? Tenchuu Red spent a full thirty minutes waiting for Mr. Godot while arranging chairs and talking about God. The internet said it was a tribute to Samuel Beckett..."

"Ah yes, that seemed to be written after the script writer had a nervous breakdown, so other people had no choice but to make the story kind of literary."

"....."

"Anyway, forget about that. Did you know? In the last episode of Tenchuu Girls' second season, although they invaded Kouzukenosuke Kira's house to defeat Kira, but actually, Kira had used cloning to make seven clones of himself—"

"UWAH! I still haven't watched it so stop spoiling!"

Ignoring Enju who was screaming with her ears covered, Momoka laughed happily.

After digesting a day of classes, Enju and Momoka were on the way home from school.

Still quite hot from the lingering heat of summer, the September sun shone brightly, attacking their skin mercilessly, but even so, Enju still walked with very lively footsteps.

The sunflowers flourishing around the school were smiling at full bloom. The cicadas were also singing their favorite songs with all their strength.

"I'm so glad I came to school."

Enju lifted her straw hat and smiled, looking up at the radiant sun. Momoka cocked her head lightly in puzzlement.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I got to know you, Momoka."

Probably unused to Enju's direct manner of speech, Momoka pulled down the brim of her hat to hide her face. In the end, she finally said "me too" quietly in a voice that was almost covered up by the cicada sounds.

At this moment, an urgent cry of "Momoka!" came from another direction.

Immediately, Momoka was tightly embraced almost like a collision.

"Mother!"

The hugged Momoka exclaimed, feeling troubled. She relaxed her guard against the woman who had suddenly appeared and examined her face.

"Oh dear... Thank goodness. Are you alright?"

The woman whom Momoka called mother was wearing copper-rimmed glasses, dressed in a black pants suit threaded with gold. She looked like a tiger mom from a wealthy family no matter how you looked. Upon closer examination, there was an expensive looking car parked on the side. She had probably come rushing out of the car as soon as she spotted Momoka.

"I was worried out of my mind after hearing that one of those red-eyes had appeared at your school. Did you get touched by that thing? You might have gotten infected with the virus."

"Seriously, Mother, you worry too much. Oh, this is Enju here, let me make introductions. This is my mother."

Momoka introduced her family excitedly. Momoka's mother cautiously bowed.

"Thank you for looking after my Momoka. Just as you can see, this is Momoka's personality, so thank you for your care."

"Jeez, Mother, don't go saying these cliched pleasantries—"

Momoka elbowed her mother lightly and protested shyly.

"But back to the subject, what are those little brats thinking, infiltrating schools? So disgusting. I recently heard a neighbor say that unwanted children easily become red-eyes."

"Eh—but I heard from a friend at school that only 'promiscuity' is likely to give birth to red-eyes."

"Child, you are forbidden from using words like those."

"Lies."

"Hmm? Enju, did you say something?"

Momoka tilted her head slightly. Turning her lively large eyes, she smiled and said:

"Oh right, Enju, please come over to my house. We can watch the final episode of Tenchuu Girls' second season together, how about that?"

Looking up with a twisted face, Enju gritted her teeth and forced out a smile.

"I still have things to do."

After saying that, Enju turned around and ran to the station.

Part 3

The fragrance of soy sauce and sweet cooking wine and the sound of bubbling were coming from the boiling mixture.

Turning the frying pan with his wrist, Rentaro shut off the gas stove only after the cooking was done. At this moment, the doorbell happened to ring.

Checking the time, it was already 8pm. He took off his apron and answered the door, only to discover a courier who was especially sunburnt.

"Please stamp or sign." After receiving the pen handed over to him, Rentaro motioned for Enju to come over from watching television inside.

Eyes flashing from curiosity, Enju jogged over. Only then did Rentaro rest the receipt form on her forehead and sign it before returning it to the courier.

With an incredulous look on his face, the courier departed.

"I knew it, using your forehead as a rest to write on really feels different."

Happy for some unknown reason, Enju was grinning like a cat and laughed:

"That aside, what got delivered here?"

Pushing aside Enju's head while she was jumping around in curiosity, Rentaro opened the package and took out the two tickets inside.

Frowning, he read the words on top. These turned out to be courtesy tickets to the observation deck of the newly constructed skyscraper in Magata City. The date was set to coincide with the fireworks celebration to be held soon.

Looking at the letter enclosed, Rentaro found out it was a previous customer. He remembered that guy was the owner of a convenience store who had commissioned a job to get rid of delinquents who refused to leave.

The letter expressed gratitude and recounted what happened afterwards, ending on a final note hoping the two of them could go enjoy the fireworks and relax for a bit.

Rentaro had mixed feelings but Enju next to him was raising the tickets up over her head, yelling "WOWWWWWWWWWWW!" with both eyes glimmering brightly.

"I must thank the mister customer next time. I am looking forward to the summer festival so much."

"About that, Enju..."

Rentaro turned to her again.

"The festival is probably going to be cancelled."

"Why?"

Seeing Enju cocking her head in puzzlement brought a heartache to Rentaro but he still replied with deliberate indifference:

"Right now, we are in a tense situation with the Sendai Area, with both sides sending patrol planes to threaten each other. Launching fireworks in this kind of powder keg situation will definitely provoke the other side."

The neighborhood association was not stupid enough to overlook this fact. Even the summer festival itself would most likely be cancelled after all, depending on the situation.

He originally thought Enju would be greatly disappointed but panting, she said boldly:

"Then I shall settle things before the summer festival. With that, the festival will go on as planned, right?"

"You're saying ridiculous things again..."

Rentaro was thinking there was no chance for him to enter the stage this time, but Enju's firm and unyielding spirit felt greatly refreshing.

"Okay, let's shelve this subject for now—"

"Shelve it?"

Arms akimbo, he drew near Enju's face.

"Let's eat first."

Brought to the low table were almost overflowing bowls of rice with chicken, onion and egg piled up on top. The partially cooked egg was wrapped gently around the other ingredients. This was Rentaro's prided masterpiece. The smell of the sweet and fragrant sauce was caressing Enju's face together with the wafting steam.

"~~~~~~~Mmm!"

Unable to resist, Enju supported herself with her hands on the table and starting bouncing up and down.

"So, Miss Aihara, do you know what this dish is called?"

"Oyako-don!"

Face filled with delight, Enju was waving her butt left and right, singing a weird song of "Rentaro and I together is a lovers-don~ ♪"

"There's no such '-don' like that."

"Then you must invent the 'lovers-don' for me to eat next time. It has to be just as passionate as between Rentaro and I!"

"Got it, then I'd better come up with the recipe for the 'freeloading-don' as well. The speed at which that dish gets cold must be frightening."

Urging her to sit then starting the meal with a simultaneous cry of "itadakimasu," Rentaro closed his eyes and carefully brought his chopsticks to his lips, then chewed.

The rich flavor of the egg and the perfectly fine-tuned sweetness and sourness of the sauce were spreading in his mouth.

Yes, excellent. As expected of my cooking. The poor little rich girl and the rabbit-model Initiator really need to upgrade themselves a bit from making explosive cooking.

Opening one eye slightly, he saw Enju's cheeks bulging. Looks like she looked the food, at least.

"Right, Enju, how was school today?"

Enju smiled brightly with rice sticking on her face.

"I made a friend."

"Did anything trouble you?"

Enju looked like she wanted to say something for an instant, but in the end, shook her head with a wry smile.

"....."

Although it was enough even though she did not say anything immediately, since Enju wanted to hide it, Rentaro decided it would be weird to pry.

"Enju, if I'm guessing like an idiot, feel free to just laugh it off, but you don't need to mind what happened at the Aihara family, it's fine."

Enju's awkward reaction greatly exceeded his expectation.

"W-Why are you bringing that up?"

"If you encounter something you can't solve on your own, feel free to ask me, don't be shy. No matter what happens, I will always stand on your side."

Enju spent some time thinking over and over in her heart.

Finally, she smiled demurely, said "Mmm-hmm, got it" and nodded.

Just as Rentaro noticed that the subject needed to end and said "okay, finish up before the food gets cold," the doorbell rang again.

Who the heck is it? Impatiently, he stood up to answer the door.

Without warning, a white object pounced on his chest, greatly startling Rentaro.

He frantically caught it in his arms and felt something filled with elasticity and softness.

Looking down at his bosom in trepidation, he met the gaze of a pair of watery eyes. Rentaro was shocked.

"Please allow me to hide inside, Mr. Satomi!"

"Y-Your Highness Seitenshi?"

There could not possibly be mistake. This was precisely the head of state who was so beautiful that looking at her from such a close distance was a hazard to one's heart.

"Rentaro! Boobs forbidden!"

Hearing the noise of scolding from behind, Rentaro frantically released Seitenshi, his entire body stiff.

"What do you mean, allow you to hide? Also, what the heck are you doing here—"

Rentaro asked awkwardly while this Tokyo Area's head of state straightened her back and stared straight at him.

"May I explain inside the house?"

The Satomi home was a singles dwelling the size of eight tatami mats without any merits apart from low rent and easy friendship with cockroaches, what would be publicly recognized as a cheap apartment. The leaking in the pipes was so bad that fixing one leak would soon lead to a leak in another, soundproofing was outrageously poor and completely failed to block the sound of the neighboring couple having disputes and throwing pots and pans.

With a princess capable of emitting holy light while sitting upright in this kind of rundown place, it was certainly an unusual scene. The rose fragrance coming from her was stunning Rentaro. Once again, he was reminded what a great beauty Seitenshi really was.

After listening to Seitenshi's explanation once with arms crossed, Rentaro finally looked up.

"In other words, you are being chased by the people of the Sacred Residence and you'd like to hire me to evade them?"

"Indeed."

"Also, you can't tell me the real reason."

"Indeed."

"Hey, stop messing around, okay?"

Rentaro tried to intimidate her but the girl stared back at him with dignified sternness. Her indomitable will could be seen in her firm eyes extremely clearly.

This is really quite problematic—Thinking that, Rentaro scratched his head.

"Do you know the Tokyo Area's current situation?"

"Extremely clear."

"In spite of that, you won't return to the Sacred Residence?"

"Indeed."

"By the way, how did you sneak out of the Sacred Residence?"

"I pulled down a curtain to make a rope to descend from a window, then I sneaked into the back of a truck that was delivering food to the Sacred Residence."

Rentaro and Enju exchanged gazes in surprise. In a rare moment, even Enju's face was showing a worried look which read "Is the security system at the Sacred Residence really okay?"

"...Also, are you able to pay for the job?"

"I shall pay through this."

Seitenshi nonchalantly took out a card from her white handbag. Presumably because she did not have a habit of going out with her purse, the card was kept directly in the bag and gave off silver-white light. It was most likely an unlimited credit card that could be used in various places.

"How did you get here?"

Perhaps not understanding the real intent behind this question, Seitenshi look at him with a surprised expression.

"By taking public transport. Why?"

"In other words, you got off the train at Magata Station, right?"

"Indeed that is so...?"

What a pain—Rentaro pressed his palm against his forehead.

It looked like this princess had no idea that even using her credit card would leave records.

Once her pursuers found out the fact that she had gotten off at Magata Station, it was not difficult to think of Rentaro's residence.

Instincts were warning Rentaro to reject this job immediately.

Completely unaware of Rentaro's thoughts at this moment, examining the Satomi home with eyes of curiosity, Seitenshi's gaze suddenly stopped at the bathroom.

"Excuse me, Mr. Satomi, may I borrow your bathroom?"

"Bathroom?"

Just as Rentaro was about to ask why, he looked down at her dress whose hem was all soiled. Her legs were also swollen.

Before arriving here, where exactly had she wandered while lost?

On further thought, she had escaped the Sacred Residence yesterday, which meant one day and one night had passed before she appeared here.

She could not have been lost for that long, right? She could probably imagine easily the consequences of intruding on the Satomi home and involving Rentaro.

Rentaro guessing she must have struggled internally before pressing the doorbell but would this sort of notion be too benevolent?

This dignified and upstanding maiden did not mention those experiences at all. Rentaro could not help but shake uncomfortably, feeling pity for her.

"Oh man, I get it, you just want to take a bath. Feel free to use it as you like."

He pointed to the bathroom in self-abandonment. "Then excuse me," Seitenshi said, then stood up and went in.

The rustling of clothing could be heard from the tightly shut changing area. As that formal dress slid down her feet, Rentaro could see a silhouette with an astonishingly slender figure appear behind the frosted glass.

While his heart was pounding hard, that silhouette's brassiere slid down to the floor then lowered her panties along her legs—At this moment, Rentaro's view instantly went dark.

Rentaro turned his head back in fright, only to see Enju clenching her hands, which she had just used to block his view, into fists, her face pouting greatly from anger.

"You never watched so seriously when I was undressing!"

There was nothing worth seeing from Enju's figure whose three sizes were identical. But if Rentaro said it out truthfully, she would probably bite him viciously, so all Rentaro could do was face away from the bathroom and cover up his ears.

Trying hard not to be too conscious of that water splashing sound, Rentaro tried to reconnect his interrupted thoughts.

Once he accepted this job, he would need to take emergency action accordingly.

His own home was not a suitable hiding place. Even if there were other places to hide, it would be very difficult to keep the Sacred Residence's experts in the dark for long.

At this moment, the doorbell rang for the third time, startling Rentaro. Thinking crap, could her pursuers be here? Fortunately, that was not it.

The sound of a key inserted into the lock could be heard while the handle turned while the door was unlocked.

Standing straight with feet apart outside was the Tendo Civil Security Company's CEO with her head of dignified, awe-inspiring black hair.

However, her eyes were turbid from suspicion. Walking impatiently, her footsteps were exceptionally fast.

"Why is the smell of perfume here?"

"Huh?"

"There is a girl in the house apart from Enju and Tina. So, it must be Miori?"

Barging into the apartment openly, Kisara looked around then came to the low table with her arms crossed.

"Satomi, sit properly please."

"O-Okay."

Intimidated by Kisara's astounding killing intent, Rentaro complied obediently to see her rolling her eyes up slightly, glaring down at him.

"Listen here, Satomi. If I had to talk about what I hate about Miori, it's the fact that despite knowing clearly that Satomi belongs to me, she puts her overnight gear in your home without permission, leaving behind changes of underwear without permission, even throwing away my hairdryer—Oh right, she even planted her red toothbrush as a marker next to your blue toothbrush in your cup, etc. I super—super hate all of this! Hey, are you listening?"

Confronted with Kisara scolding angrily with her face all red, Rentaro lost the opportunity to mention Seitenshi's visit.

At this time, the sounds of the shower could be heard during this pause in the conversation, prompting Kisara to glare viciously in the bathroom's direction.

"Over there, I see."

"Oh, hold on—"

Kisara intruded into the bathroom without another word. Rentaro's outstretched arm just barely missed grabbing her—

"Kyahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"E-Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Hearing two screams coming simultaneously from the bathroom, Rentaro clutched his head in distress for being a step too slow.

At this moment, he was suddenly struck by inspiration.

This thought made him clap his hands once.

He had found the place to hide Seitenshi.

Thirty minutes later...

The doorbell rang for the fourth time today. Finally, they're here, thought Rentaro. He tried to answer the door with as much feigned impatience as possible.

"You are Rentaro Satomi, right?"

A well-built man with a white beard suddenly appeared, stepping rudely into through the entrance by force.

His gaze was slightly downturned. His leather shoe was forcing the door open while his muscular chest brought indescribable pressure.

"What do you want with me?"

"I am from the Sacred Residence. The reason cannot be disclosed, but we wish to search your home."

"Why must I let you guys search? Get out of here quickly."

"That won't do."

The man yelled behind him and a group of men in white suits with the Sacred Residence's emblem appeared out of nowhere, filing into the eight-tatami single apartment.

Ignoring the flustered Rentaro, the white-bearded man ordered "check the ceiling and under the tatami as well!" In the middle of eating her oyako-don, Enju also showed a face of shock at the sudden appearance of the men.

"Mr. Hashiba."

The white-bearded man called Hashiba whispered with a white-suited subordinate for a while then nodded.

Together with his subordinate, he went over to the door of the bathroom from where water sounds could be heard.

"You can't go in!"

"That is for us to judge."

Ignoring Rentaro's efforts to stop them, Hashiba pushed open the separating door between the bathroom and the living room.

The instant the other door in the changing area was pulled open, amidst hazy steam, a figure screamed briefly and hugged herself in the depths of the bathroom.

"E-Excuse me!"

Rushing out of the bathroom, Hashiba frantically took out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead and tried to smooth things over.

"Since it is Miss Tendo inside, why didn't you explain clearly beforehand?"

"It's you guys who refused to listen and forced your way in to have a look."

"Mr. Hashiba, search is negative!"

Rentaro looked at the voice's direction to see Hashiba's subordinate, who had moved a ladder to open the ceiling boards and check inside, looking at Hashiba with a troubled expression together with another guy who had lifted up the tatami.

Rentaro crossed his arms arrogantly.

"So, old man, how are you going to take responsibility here?"

Hashiba looked at Rentaro in chagrin with a wrinkled face. Taking out his business card from his suit pocket, he stuffed it into Rentaro's hand.

"All damages will be compensated by the Sacred Residence. Suppose Her Highness were to visit your home, please do contact us using this number."

Hashiba motioned with his head to leave. Hence, his subordinates vanished like a storm as quickly as they had arrived.

Confirming that the last man had disappeared out the front door, Rentaro opened the step trash can with his foot and threw away Hashiba's business card.

Rentaro turned around and said "Hey, you can come out now." Soon after...

Hugging herself in embarrassment, the girl in the black sailor-style uniform finally emerged from the changing area. Behind her, Seitenshi walked out quietly in her dress.

Greatly impressed, Seitenshi held her palms together in front of her chest and said:

"Impressive as always, Mr. Satomi. The plan was quite perfect."

"How was it perfect? I got seen naked!"

Even that Hashiba would not have expected Seitenshi to be hiding in a blind spot against the wall inside the steamy bathroom, right?

"Just name it the 'Ninja technique! Women's baths are barrier spells against men', okay?"

Muttering "nin-nin" while making a ninja finger pose, Enju made Seitenshi giggle with laughter.

"And so?" Rentaro urged Seitenshi while scratching the back of his head.

"With this, the job is done, right?"

"I would like to commission you for one more job. Rather, this is the main point."

"Damn it, you keep causing more trouble for me."

After hearing Rentaro's sardonic remark, Seitenshi smiled. Holding her hands together in front of her dress, she announced:

"CEO Tendo and Mr. Satomi, I would like to request of you to retrieve Solomon's Ring and the Scorpion's Head."

Part 4

The crystal storage medium that Seitenshi had brought sparkled with royal blue color. Its size was so compact that one would mistake it for a sapphire if not told beforehand.

After they turned off the lights according to Seitenshi's instructions, the crystal placed on the table gave off blue light, suddenly producing a giant three dimensional model, a projection of a building that looked like a factory.

"The incident happened five days earlier at a research laboratory in Russia."

Reacting to Seitenshi's words, the model revealed the building's structure in the air and popped out a few photographs.

Blood was splattered inside the facility with a mess of mechanical parts with chalk lines drawn on the floor. These photos were probably taken during crime scene investigation. The indoor environment was a mess with signs of ransacking. Only the chalk lines and the blood stains silently conveyed the victims' protests.

Holding chopsticks, Rentaro eyed his oyako-don on the table a number of times, clearly looking a bit sick in his face. At least, this was stuff one should not be looking at during dinner.

"Someone invaded this laboratory and stole a top-secret research subject."

"So what you mentioned just now is this so-called research subject...?"

Enju cocked her head and asked. Seitenshi nodded seriously.

"Yes, the codename for that item under development is Solomon's Ring. We have reasons to believe that it has a strong connection to the recent incident."

"I remember from the legends of King Solomon that there was a ring which gave the ability to talk with animals."

Quite impressed, Rentaro looked at Kisara, who placed her arms akimbo in a slightly sulking manner and responded:

"Of course I know something of that level."

Rentaro looked back at Seitenshi.

"So what you want to retrieve is that ring?"

"Just as I mentioned, Solomon's Ring is just a codename. Its true identity is a translation device the Russian government was researching in order to communicate with Gastrea."

"Wha...!?"

Rentaro was not the only one jumping in fright.

Looking at his companions in turn, Kisara and Enju, who were staring wide-eyed, frozen like statues, exchanging glances.

"That kind of thing, is it really possible...?"

Seitenshi shook her head.

"No, the communication achieved by the ring is greatly limited. Although it can convey simple thoughts and ideas to Gastrea, what the Gastrea's howling means is apparently unknown."

"Then why did the people attacking the lab target the ring?"

"Previously, we only heard about this incident without paying particular attention—until Libra appeared."

"No way..."

Seitenshi's narrowed eyes shone with light.

"Almost at the same time, a laboratory in the Tokyo Area was also invaded. The researchers were tragically massacred. Judging from the methods, the crimed was committed by the same organization. And what was stolen from us was—"

"—The Scorpion's Head... Right?"

The instant this name came up earlier, Rentaro already prepared himself to some extent.

One of the Zodiac Gastrea—the Scorpion was the Stage V which had appeared during the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism incident as well as one of the ultimate Gastrea that made Rentaro steel his resolve to go down this path.

He originally thought he would not hear that name again.

"Precisely. We reclaimed the dead body of the Scorpion that Rentaro Satomi and Enju Aihara had defeated then conducted research in secret."

"Why—I guess I'm really stupid for asking this question."

"Gastrea bodies, particularly those of the Zodiac, are difficult to obtain. Research organizations willing to pay a hundred thousand per gram are too many to list out."

"What do these two stolen objects have to do with Libra?"

Kisara could not help but interject.

"Ten years ago, when eleven Zodiac Gastrea appeared around the world at the same time, someone speculated whether the Stage Vs were capable of communicating to one another through vocal noises. In fact, taking the Scorpion's Head—more accurately, the vocal cords taken from the Scorpion—then soaking it in Cell Activator fluid and applying electrical stimulation, one can observe a mixture of electrical and sonar pulses emitted by the cells. However, it is nothing more than noise without any information to us humans. The scholars in charge of analyzing the waveforms are stuck in a quandary."

"That's why Solomon's Ring is needed as a translation device to interpret that, right?"

Seitenshi continued without confirming or denying.

"Just as mentioned earlier, Solomon's Ring was still under development. Although overall, there are virtually no species where communication of meaning is possible, Libra is apparently an exception."

Rentaro rubbed his chin and pondered.

"Hold on a sec. The incident of Libra occupying that mine in Nasu happened immediately after the two thefts, so the reason why Libra appeared at the mine and stayed there to synthesize lethal viruses was all because of someone's orders."

"...That possibility exists too. It is a fact that both laboratories were attacked."

"Why didn't the Sacred Residence handle it? This is a serious problem."

"Unfortunately, everything mentioned so far was purely on a theoretical level. Without evidence to explain to the other Areas, unilaterally announcing it will only sound like an excuse. In fact, the Legacy of Seven Stars does indeed have the power to summon Gastrea. This time, we are unable to censure Prime Minister Inou for his early accusation of the Tokyo Area being the culprit either."

Arms crossed, Rentaro rapidly drummed his fingers in agitation.

"This is all a disaster borne from you guys following a policy of secrecy. Haven't you heard of the proverb warning against acting suspiciously in delicate situations, 'don't adjust your shoe in the middle of a melon field'?"

"Indeed, I am willing to accept reproach for holding onto a suspicious secret. Nevertheless, having been groomed in the past as a future Tendo politician, Mr. Satomi, you should be very well aware of Prime

Minister Kaihoku and President Saitake's character. Even if the Legacy's information were to be publicized, do you really believe they will only use it for peace?"

".....So who the heck perpetrated this stupid business in the first place?"

"The suspects had attacked the laboratory by using light weaponry for suppression. Professionals, judging from their invasion methods. Security cameras also confirmed the identity of one member in the organization, a wanted international terrorist."

Seitenshi rotated the facility's floor plan then tapped a corner of the corridor to magnify it.

The picture taken from above was very clear, depicting a person wearing a tactical vest, raising a light firearm towards the screen. With the face covered up leaving only the eyes exposed, it was impossible to tell who it was.

"There's no way to identify him like this, right?"

"Not necessarily."

Seitenshi rapidly tapped the holo-keyboard to trim the screen, finally focusing on the man's eyes.

After the analysis of pre-recorded iris patterns and comparing that to the international wanted list, a Caucasian man's photo suddenly popped up together with a detailed profile.

"Mark Meyerhold, a Belarusian who had served for seven years in the Spetsnaz special forces of Russia. There are two other suspects who

have been identified through vocal scans to be Belarusian ex-convicts who had committed crimes in Belarus."

"Belarus? But isn't Belarus already...?"

Seitenshi nodded, greatly impressed that Rentaro understood.

"Indeed. The Greater Minsk Area, which used to be the Belarus capital, was destroyed by none other than Libra. I was very curious too and attempted to search for information about the Greater Minsk Area's final moments... Very tragic."

After shaking her head and closing her eyes in sorrow, Seitenshi finally looked at Rentaro.

"Also, there is something I must inform you, Mr. Satomi. These terrorists used to be subordinates working under Andre Litvintsev."

This time, Rentaro was completely dumbfounded.

"Did you say Andrei Litvintsev huh...?"

Rentaro felt a chill along his back as though ice cubes had been poured.

It was a name he knew, one that he could not forget even if he wanted to.

"Who is that guy?"

Rentaro turned his gaze to Enju who was cocking her head with a puzzled look on her face.

"Think back a bit, roughly half a year ago. Wasn't there a local resident who complained there were suspicious people lurking around? That's the guy."

Enju clapped her hands together once.

"Ohoh, so it's that illegal trespasser."

Kisara sighed.

"In actual fact, it was not simply a problem of suspicious people. That incident was considered one of the greatest espionage reveals ever since the Sorge Incident. It was huge on the news media."

Rentaro turned to face Seitenshi again.

"What about that guy?"

"Serving a life sentence in a prison on an artificial island. I believe that it is highly like that Litvintsev was the one pulling the strings behind the laboratory raids this time, hence we are currently in negotiations to reduce his sentence. However..."

"Couldn't reach an agreement?"

"No, possibly worse. Particularly from your standpoint, Mr. Satomi."

"What do you mean?"

Seitenshi hesitated. Rentaro silently urged her to continue.

"Litvintsev named you, Mr. Satomi, to serve as the mediating negotiator."

Rentaro felt discomfort spreading in his chest like a wave. He could not help but frown.

"Me? Why?"

"The reason is unknown but Litvintsev insisted that he was willing to negotiate only if you go."

Rentaro stroked his chin to organize his thoughts.

"In other words, it's very likely that Litvintsev's goons raided the labs in Russia and the Tokyo Area and used the stolen items to control Libra, right? So what is their goal?"

"This is also unknown. The current situation is that the perpetrators' side has not made demands to the Sacred Residence. However, guessing their motives and taking action now is of paramount importance.

"The deadline is approaching, second by second, minute by minute. Including today, there are only three days left to eliminate the threat of Libra and prevent total war from erupting between the Tokyo and Sendai Areas. Before that, you must meet Litvintsev at the artificial island prison and find out where his comrades are hiding. I am counting on you."

A windless night in the town of Magata, it was so quiet that even the cicadas had stopped making noise.

Showing sharp corners, the moon illuminated the streets where cars rushed past one another every now and then.

"I am absolutely opposed to this!"

Looking at Kisara's back view while she was striding along with her shoulders heaving up and down from anger, Rentaro had no choice but to reach out powerlessly.

"No, but this can't be helped. RIght now, my home is the only guaranteed safe place."

Rentaro suddenly bumped his nose into Kisara's back when she stopped, startling him to stumble. Arms akimbo, Kisara turned around.

"You great big fool! That's not the issue. A girl like Her Highness Seitenshi absolutely cannot sleep under the same roof with a boy."

Rentaro looked up at the sky, tormented by this dilemma.

His answer to Seitenshi's job was a state of pending. When discussing about letting Seitenshi live there for now, Kisara vehemently opposed.

Since they had to ensure Seitenshi's safety and not let the people of the Sacred Residence know, Rentaro's home was the only option, but for some reason, Kisara still could not accept it at all. Since a while ago, she had been firmly insisting "Absolutely not!"

Rentaro could not help but sigh.

"Am I that unworthy of trust?"

"How could I possibly trust you?"

Kisara looked down, sulking, murmuring softly "because you made a move on me too", her cheeks blushing red.

Rentaro instantly felt his entire body breaking out in sweat while the temperature of his face grew hot.

"No, that's because, uh, in other words..."

Just as he was trying hard to squeeze out an excuse from the chaos in his mind, Rentaro's consciousness was suddenly pulled to the incident which had happened a month earlier.

With the Kihachi Suibara Murder Case as a trigger, the framed Rentaro had investigated and exposed the Black Swan Project, thereby foiling Atsurou Hitsuma's conspiracy.

After the incident was settled, in a certain environment, he had kissed Kisara. But after that, Kisara had—

"Umm... Miss Kisara, back then, why did you—"

"—Oh! Right, I remember now."

Kisara suddenly struck her fists together and looked up with an anxious look.

"I still need to purchase discount products from the supermarket today. Tina must be hungry. It's fine for you to see me off until here, Satomi. Good bye."

"Ah, hey—"

As soon as she finished, Kisara dashed off, her figure gradually diminishing in size before Rentaro's eyes.

After she departed like a storm, Rentaro was left all alone on the spot.

He looked around to see that they had reached the front of Magata Park. The leisure facilities were shrouded in darkness. The illuminated clock was currently displaying half past midnight. There were no

supermarkets still open for business at this hour, at least to Rentaro's knowledge.

"What the heck... is up with her?"

"I'm home."

With complicated troubles on his mind, Rentaro took off his shoes gruffly at the entrance, only to discover a rare scene with Enju and Seitenshi sitting side by side ahead of him.

Seitenshi was sitting formally in seiza while trying her best to look ladylike, Enju was imitating the former, barely keeping her back straight while gluing her eyes to the television in the living room.

It looked like a live broadcast. Backlit, the Sacred Residence was surrounded by noisy crowds. Standing in the center, the news reporter was clutching the mic hard with both hands. After glaring hard, he reported solemnly:

'Another night has passed since the emergency press conference at the Sacred Residence. The Zodiac Gastrea, Libra, remains unmoving at that Nasu mine.'

The scene suddenly changed to what was probably a pre-recorded video taken from the air.

"Libra..."

Its long and narrow body was coiled in a spiral, its ferocious reptilian appearance like a dragon or a snake. Although the virus sacs were not visible in the video, they were surely increasing in size every second, waiting to be released.

'In response to the Sendai Area locking down our embassy, the Tokyo Area has taken retaliatory measures. Currently the atmosphere between the two Areas is very tense. Prime Minister Inou still insists strongly that the Seitenshi administration is the mastermind behind the summoning of Libra and is sending spy planes over the Libra and the Tokyo Area as part of containment. The Sacred Residence has not responded on this point, but under Her Highness Seitenshi's orders, surely they must be negotiating under the table with full effort.'

Seitenshi showed a complicated expression on her face.

"Wouldn't it be better if you went back?"

"Mr. Satomi..."

She probably noticed Rentaro only now. Turning her beautiful but melancholic face towards him, she then shook her head.

"I shall not return."

Unable to bear it, Enju jumped up.

"Rentaro, the television is filled with emergency news broadcasts, boring me to death. Tenchuu Girls got suspended because of special reports."

"Well, the magical girls of justice need to rest occasionally too."

Go take a bath—Rentaro bade the grumbling Enju to take a change of underwear into the changing area, urging her to take a bath. Just as he breathed a sigh of relief that the unbearably noisy kid had finally disappeared, Enju suddenly poked her smiling face out to say "don't peek, okay—" then vanished quickly.

"Like anyone would!"

Hearing light giggling from the side, Rentaro turned his head to see Seitenshi covering her mouth and laughing in amusement.

"This child is so straightforward."

"Enju probably can't understand at least half the stuff that was reported just now."

"No one can understand it. Even I am half in doubt."

The news report was suddenly interrupted. A television commercial's lively rhythm was inserted. The light from the screen's scanning lines was making the sides of Rentaro and Seitenshi's faces flash.

"Regarding whether you will be accepting this commissioned job, are you able to give a response now? You must have discussed with CEO Tendo just now."

"Oh—About that..."

Naturally, Rentaro wanted to discuss it.

But before that could happen, Kisara already left, so in the end, he did not even get a chance to mention it...

Rentaro looked at the television.

The commercial had ended at some point. The broadcast was currently showing the family of the imprisoned embassy staff.

A woman carrying a child looked very haggard with disheveled hair, sobbing while pleading with the Sendai Area to release her husband.

"I accept. As for the CEO side, I'll talk to her again later."

"Is it really okay without discussing with CEO Tendo?"

"It's fine. As long as I insist on accepting the job, the CEO cannot resist."

Rentaro spoke on impulse, then suddenly realized.

Right now, was he accepting the job to prevent the sorrow and laments that were about to happen, or was he simply trying to mock Kisara for her indecision...?

Realizing he was soon becoming a hateful bastard, Rentaro shook his head and stopped thinking. His sanity prevented him from delving deeper in the matter.

Pretty white smoke drifted from the mosquito incense holder that was shaped like a piglet. After being pushed around by the oscillating electric fan and the air conditioning, it dispersed, leaving only a pungent lingering smell.

Unable to sleep, Rentaro remained wide awake.

Placing both hands behind his head, he stared aimlessly at the wood patterns on the dark ceiling.

Suddenly, a breath of "mmm" was heard by his ear, accompanied by someone turning over in her sleep.

Exhaling while in deep sleep, the breath felt a bit ticklish. Rentaro turned his head to see Enju's sleeping face right in front of him, making him smile wryly.

In addition, on the other side of Enju's futon was Seitenshi with her hands clasped in front of her chest, giving off inviolable serenity while her chest heaved up and down regularly.

Simply dressed in the pink pajamas borrowed temporarily from Miori's overnight gear, the noble beauty given off from the side of her face was not diminished the slightest.

Rentaro got up and went to the washroom to relieve his bladder. After finishing his business, he walked unsteadily to the fridge and took out a half-finished sports drink, taking great gulps.

Cold liquid flowed into the scorching depths of his stomach.

Turning his face to the window, he saw moonlight streaming in. A bright, moonlit night.

At this time, he noticed the mixed among the noises from summer insects gathered outdoors, there was a tiny sound that was easy to miss.

Looking at the source, he gasped.

Seitenshi had her back to him. With trembling shoulders, she was sobbing quietly.

Rentaro knelt down and asked "Hey, are you okay?" The instant he placed his hand on her shoulder, Seitenshi suddenly turned her head back.

Seeing her eyes swollen from crying, reflecting the moonlight and seeming so moist and bright, Rentaro instantly felt his entire body freeze stiff.

The sound of summer insects beating their wings broke the surrounding silence.

At this instant, Rentaro's thoughts returned to "Why exactly did Seitenshi have to escape from the Sacred Residence?" The question at the very root.

On the surface, it was Kikunojyo refusing to assign the task of negotiating with Litvintsev to Rentaro, which was why Seitenshi secretly visited Rentaro's home.

But was that really it?

According to the hierarchy of power, no one could give orders to Seitenshi who was the head of state in the first place.

She could very well kick Kikunojyo's suggestion aside and openly commission the Tendo Civil Security Company for the job.

So why?

Clutching the sleeve of Rentaro's pajamas with a trembling hand, Seitenshi looked down.

"Recently every day, I would always keep my hand on the Bible, asking myself honestly what I ought to do. But no matter how hard I try, I am merely the Tokyo Area's decoration."

Her ensuing monologue was filled with intense despair.

"Everyone says that as long as the Honorable Kikunojyo was around, it was enough... Someone like me is completely unneeded...!"

"Your Highness Seitenshi..."

"I am truly in pain. I clearly want to lead a life trusting in the benevolence of mankind, but everyone gets manipulated by the tides of hatred. Mr. Satomi, what should I do... What should I do...?"

Just leave it to me, don't worry, it'll be okay—All kinds of responses spun around in Rentaro's mind but in the end, none of them rushed out of his throat.

Instead, Rentaro placed his palm on Seitenshi's tightly clenched fist, silently gripping her like that.

Chapter 2 - Bullet of World Revolution

Part 1

While the Tokyo Area was filled with the atmosphere of war, the weather completely failed to read the mood and seemed to be incomparably sunny. The insects of late summer played a symphony of sounds, enshrouding Rentaro.

After sending Enju off to elementary school, Rentaro called Magata High to notify them he was going to be absent. Then wiping sweat nonstop, he took a public bus, getting off at Magata Municipal University Hospital.

He passed through just by showing his face at the reception then made his way to Sumire's lab, walking down the stairs whose slope seemed to lead to hell.

Before going to meet Litvintsev, he had a worry he had to dispel first no matter what.

"Doctor, are you—"

Here? —Before he could finish, something suddenly flew straight at his face, accompanied by an explosive bang.

"Wha—!?"

He frantically guarded his face. A moment later, he felt something drift lightly, covering his head.

Slowly opening his eyes, he picked up the thing on his head and rubbed it in front of his eyes. This loose and puffy thing consisted of aluminum foil and shredded ribbons.

Then immediately, the living ghost story of the university hospital suddenly appeared before his eyes, wearing Groucho glasses and a cone-shaped hat, throwing the spent party popper into the trash can.

"Oh my! Congratulations, young Satomi."

She pulled the string next to her, causing the ball suspended above to open, lowering a banner reading "Condolences Party for Rentaro Satomi Getting Dumped by Kisara."

Rentaro felt dizzy and pressed his hand against the corner of his eye.

"...Hey Doctor, did you really set up an ambush here just to do something so meaningless?"

"'Take the lead to do annoying things to others' is the family precept of the Murotos."

The female professor in the white lab coat took off her Groucho glasses to reveal the malicious smile behind them.

"How the heck did your parents get married, Doctor?"

"Now that would be a massive mystery. By the way—"

Taking a seat on a chair on the side, Sumire smiled with excessive delight.

"I heard you were dumped?"

"I didn't get dumped."

"In that case, explain in detail. I only heard the rough gist over the phone. Please entrust your love troubles to the love counselor, Doctor Muroto."

Making a victorious V-gesture and winking while sticking out her tongue, despite her adult age, Rentaro could not find any words to comment.

"Have you had enough experience in love to offer advice to others, Doctor?"

"Nope—Apart from the cadavers delivered here, I have no prospective partners. The men I went out with all ended up as corpses, so in other words, all my partners are basically dead bodies. Fundamentally, I hate all living people."

"Do you hate me too?"

"Of course! You shitty little brat, you take being liked for granted? Ptooey."

"Woah, don't spit on me."

Then Rentaro bitterly reflected on what Sumire meant by saying he was dumped. Indeed, looking at the current situation objectively, perhaps she really was right.

"...I guess, there's probably not much point discussing with you."

Rentaro threw these words out with a broken heart. Sumire shrugged.

"You wanted to discuss something with me?"

"....."

Urged by Sumire, Rentaro sat down on a stool, staring intently at the floor.

If it was to Sumire, he could probably explain that situation clearly.

Rentaro touched his lips lightly with a finger. The cold sensation awakened past memories in his mind.

After thwarting the Black Swan Project, he had resumed his awkward relationship with Kisara and in the process, Rentaro had taken one step to shorten their distance.

However, what happened after that completely exceeded the range of what Rentaro could predict.

Kisara suddenly went pale and trembled, even wrapping her arms tightly around her body. Shoving Rentaro away, she fled the scene as fast as she could.

In the beginning, Rentaro wondered if his confession was unrequited, but upon thinking back, that did not seem to be the case. However, no matter how he pondered, he would always get stuck at that point.

Until now, he still had no idea why she reacted with that action. Even if he tried to ask her directly, she would change the subject, thus leaving Rentaro's feelings in suspension, unable to go up or down.

"That's no longer an issue of maidenly hearts."

After listening to the entire story, Sumire leaned her chin on a hand, her eyes plunged into deep thought with unprecedented seriousness.

"...You're not going to make fun of me using nonsense like 'ultimately, you must have messed up the sequence and groped her boobs first' or 'you must have felt felt up her butt'?"

"I could make jokes but you'll surely get depressed to death if you heard them. My principle is to torment people until they're half dead. If

I fail to strike a balance and encourage you to keep making advances on Kisara, then it's pointless."

Despite mixed with joking, these words did secretly convey encouragement, making Rentaro feel much more relaxed. In his mind, he thanked the doctor.

"Perhaps Kisara feels guilty about the fact that she has become happy."

Rentaro could not help but rise from his seat.

"Why?"

Sumire swept her bangs away in annoyance.

"Calm down first. You understand that Kisara supports herself with the desire to avenge her parents, right? Although it was a long time ago, I did read Kisara's patient file through medical channels. I remember a note on insulin doses and also the clinical data from the psychiatrist who counseled her after her parents were killed. The file mentioned that Kisara feels that if she were to obtain happiness, a sense of guilt towards her dead parents would arise. At the time, she would see apparitions of her dead parents occasionally, standing before her eyes in the form of ghosts, demanding their surviving daughter avenge her."

"No way."

That was identical to Hamlet seeing the dead king's ghost. Uncle Osamusan and Aunt Yomiko would not say something like that to their daughter.

"After a while, the patient records no longer say anything like this again. The doctor wrote at the end of the medical history that the patient had

finally freed herself from the tragedy, making her decision to live her life properly, but I find it very suspicious. Didn't Kisara recently chase down one of the culprits and took revenge? In that case, it would not come as a surprise that she was literally being troubled by ghosts of the past again."

"..."

Even if that were the truth, Rentaro could not take any joy in that.

The meaning of Kisara's behavior, an issue that had remained stuck in his throat for so long, finally received a logical explanation even though it was purely speculative. This felt like a refreshing breeze blowing into his heart that was originally blocked.

Rentaro scratched his head and refreshed his mood.

"Doctor, is it really okay for you to leak a patient's confidential information to me?"

Sumire shrugged.

"It's useless asking for professional ethics from a fallen doctor, right?"

"I guess I owe you one again."

"Don't worry about repaying them. After all, your combined debt owed to me to this date is probably impossible to repay even if you use your next life. But then again, speaking of which—"

Sumire took a breath, raised her arms and stretched.

"The Tokyo and Sendai Areas are currently facing the eruption of total war. I can't believe you're still troubling over petty romance. What a guy who truly lacks crisis awareness."

"Then what's your view on recent events, Doctor?"

"Absolutely worthless. Clearly, humans will eventually die out even without slaughtering one another."

Sumire smiled with full confidence and continued:

"Humans all die eventually. One day, mankind will come to realization that resisting death is completely meaningless."

"You're still the same as always, Doctor."

Sumire spread her arms pretentiously.

"Because I am the one who extols death. Besides, dying is dying. I can't understand people like you who attaches feelings or significance to death."

Rentaro stood up from his seat.

"Doctor, I'd like your guidance on a few things that happened recently. Solomon's Ring from a Russian lab and the Scorpion's Head from a Japanese lab were both stolen."

A flash of light appeared in the depths of Sumire's eyes.

"Continue."

Having sought Seitenshi's permission beforehand, Rentaro told Sumire everything he had heard from Seitenshi yesterday.

"Mm-hmm, Solomon's Ring huh? To think they picked such a classic name for what is merely a translation device."

After listening to everything, Sumire looked up lazily.

"The 'wise king' Solomon 'spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes'—This is quote from the book of Kings in the Old Testament of the Bible. But back to the subject, this interpretation of understanding animal language by wearing 'Solomon's Ring' was apparently a misconception that arised during copying or translating."

"Do you know anything about the stolen stuff?"

Sumire shook her head impatiently and added "no" to deny.

"My direction in research was defined by mechanized soldiers for resisting Gastrea directly. I never attempted the path of taming Gastrea, not even once. Although I think it's quite an interesting idea, since that thing was not complete, it meant that they must have hit a wall during their research."

"Even so, perhaps by using together with the Scorpion's vocal cords, they could issue orders to Libra so this can't be ignored."

"Your worries are reasonable, but unfortunately, I can't be of much help about a translation device from foreign research. However, I can imagine how things will develop if the Tokyo and Sendai Areas continue to face off like this."

"Isn't that full-scale war between the two Areas?"

"No, even more serious than that."

As though teaching a stupid student, Sumire slowed down her rate of speech.

"Nuclear war on a global scale. In other words, a Third World War."

Rentaro forgot to breathe for a few seconds, staring intently at Sumire.

"W-What? Doctor, didn't you watch the news?"

After forcing these words out, Rentaro tried to twist his lips to laugh off Sumire's claim as a joke, but after seeing her cold and stiff expression, he could not laugh at all.

"Reality will often turn into a nightmare beyond your imagination. Just turn on the television and have a look."

With a soulless look, Rentaro operated the remote control she had tossed, aiming it at the moldy television in the corner of the room.

So old that it made him doubt whether the screen still worked, the television finally projected light slowly. In the end, the many ships of a fleet advancing across the sea appeared on screen.

Accompanied by cruisers, destroyers and supply ships, wasn't the massive object sailing rapidly in the center a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier?

Due to their astounding cost to build and maintain, even in the year 2031, Japan still did not have any Area capable of possessing one of them.

In the beginning, Rentaro was thinking this was a foreign television drama and wanted to change the channel, but seeing the familiar news logo in the corner of the screen, he instantly realized something was wrong.

A scrolling headline of "Suspecting the Tokyo Area of contravening Biological Weapons Ban Treaty, America is taking military action!" appeared in a one part of the screen.

Rentaro was stunned, unable to pull himself together. In the next moment, the camera switched to somewhere else, showing another fleet and pointing out it was news about the Russian navy.

'The above scenes depict the American and Russian fleets approaching the Tokyo Area's territorial waters.'

The camera returned to the recording studio where the news host and some kind of commentator were urgently discussing something. Judging from their anxious looks, Rentaro could tell that his final hope for it all being a massive joke dwindle to nothing.

"What the heck is going on? Also, Biological Weapons Ban Treaty is referring to...?"

Rentaro looked back with a stiff expression and asked. Sumire stared at the screen with a dark gaze.

"Things have further deteriorated while you were on your way here. The Biological Weapons Ban Treaty is part of international law. The Legacy of Seven Stars, rumored to control Stage V Gastrea freely, has been deemed a biological weapon, probably. America is using the contravention of international law as an excuse to demand the inspection of the entire Tokyo Area including the Sacred Residence. Naturally, the Tokyo Area will likely refuse."

"Other countries getting involved in the war between two Areas of Japan? How did it come to this?"

Sumire looked at Rentaro with eyes of pity.

"The superficial reason is that using prioritized access to varanium supplies as a condition, the Tokyo Area sought assistance from the semi-allies of Russia, England and France. In order to resist, the Sendai Area also requested help from America, Australia and China. However, that is not the real objective."

"What is it?"

"Underground resources are never distributed evenly. For example, there are gold and diamonds in Africa, crude oil in the Middle East, while varanium's primary exporter is Japan. The Tokyo Area's production of varanium makes up 31% of the world supply whereas the Sendai Area also has 16%. If the Sendai Area collapses, the Tokyo Area's expanded territory will obtain mining rights to roughly half the world's supply of varanium; and vice versa if the Tokyo Area falls. If the Sendai Area starts a war before Libra's virus sacs are released and manages to defeat the Tokyo Area which has been exhausted by the battles against the Scorpion and Aldebaran, they stand to monopolize 47% of the world's varanium supply. Do you understand what that implies?"

"No..."

Despite clearly not understanding, Rentaro's voice still trembled.

"Naturally, varanium is currently the material for Monoliths and is also indispensable for manufacturing weapons and ammunition. If one nation monopolized half the world supply of varanium, they would be free to set prices as they wish."

Rentaro could not help but exclaim "ah."

Sumire nodded silently.

"You figured out what foreign powers are thinking, right? For example, suppose the Tokyo Area's food is 100% dependent on the other Areas, then once the other Areas place a total ban on exporting food to the Tokyo Area, the Tokyo Area would have no choice but to obey them, coughing up the cash regardless how high they raise prices, right? This is the same principle. Regarding this war between two Areas in the Far East, the result could lead to the rise and fall of many other nations. From a foreign perspective, this is something that must be prevented. Currently, American and Russian hands probably have their fingers on the nuclear launch buttons. This kind of situation where an argument between children requires the intervention of adults, it's all because the Tokyo Area shoulders the 'resource curse'."

"What about the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs?"

"Japan's five Areas have essentially been recognized as independent states, so this has nothing to do with domestic affairs."

Rentaro rapidly searched his mind for a rebuttal, trying his hardest to think in any case.

"So! —By the way, now that things have come to this, won't the United Nations intervene in a conflict between two Areas?"

Sumire shrugged, unimpressed by Rentaro's question.

"That whatever United Nations has stopped serving any function a long time ago ever since the Gastrea War. Even if it still had an effect, there is past precedent in their failure to stop the arms race between America and the USSR during the Cold War. What mankind has learned

from the great lesson is that when the situation get too serious, no one can stop things from happening."

Rentaro looked at the television to see the news host seemed helpless and kept repeating how he had no idea about Japan's future.

Sumire then spoke in a much gentler tone than before.

"Young Satomi, do you know why the First World War broke out as recorded in history books?"

Rentaro shook his head blankly.

"June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, a young man belonging to a secret Serbian terrorist organization chanced upon the Austrian crown prince's car that had lost its way. Seizing the excellent chance granted by providence, he killed the prince. This led to a decisive deterioration in relationships between the nations of Europe, Turkey and Russia, which weren't particularly amicable to begin with, thus resulting in a great war killing ten million people. Also another example, on April 19, 1775, the Battle of Lexington in the Boston countryside. At the time, the colonies still had not resolved to declare war on Britain. Seeing British troops appear, the local commander gave orders to disperse. However, someone shot the first bullet, thereby igniting the fires of war. Ultimately, the British army's elite troops were defeated soundly and the American War of Independence thus began. And that bullet fired by some unknown person was called the 'shot heard round the world.' Including that shot fired in Sarajevo and the bullet at Lexington, both were cases where a single bullet changed the course of history."

"What are you trying to say?"

"My point is that when pressure reaches critical, all it takes is a single bullet to spark a war. Furthermore, once the fires of war are lit, war does not stop until a massive number of people are dead. Right now, the Tokyo and Sendai Areas have locked down airports and each other's embassy. These back and forth measures of retaliation are precisely the best evidence of pressures between the two Areas reaching critical point. All it takes is the addition of a single bullet. This situation is far more serious than you thought."

Elbows on the table, Sumire interlocked her hands together and rested her chin on them.

"Young Satomi, you must hurry to negotiate with Andrei Litvintsev. You are the only one capable of cleaning up the situation. Don't let the bullet of world revolution be fired."

Thinking this was the greatest joke in the world, Sumire grinned:

"Perhaps the world's fate is in your hands."

Part 2

The instant the last of the provisional Monoliths was set up in the Tokyo Area during the Gastrea War ten years ago, thereby blocking the Gastrea invasion, rather than a sense of salvation arising in people's hearts, it would be better to describe it as a feeling of endless exhaustion, wondering in doubt if everything was finally over.

When then-Prime Minister Zama declared the war ended over television, radio and the internet, all the people wept with hot tears without exception.

Even the people themselves could not understand which emotion in particular was behind their own tears.

It was grief for those who were killed, regret for defeat in war, as well as a sense of emptiness arising from incomprehension of what everything they had done meant.

Worried about the population which had decreased to less than 10% of the original, Japan's last prime minister, Zama, had set a policy banning surgical abortion for all pregnancies. As a result, this led to his fall from power.

Nicknamed the Abortion Ban, this policy led to an explosive increase in the births of Cursed Children who were gradually surfacing at the time. Due to loss of birth control and the fact that unwanted children kept being born (this was how unfounded ideas of unwanted children getting born as Cursed Children came into being), the social problems of abandoned babies and child abuse became exceptionally rampant.

Ironically, in the year 2029, in other words, two years earlier, former Prime Minister Zama himself was pronounced dead at the hospital after getting his neck broken by a Cursed Child whose birth had come about thanks to his ban on abortions.

Zama's fall from power led to the rise of the first Seitenshi who united Tokyo with the various neighboring prefectures that had fallen to pieces, thus establishing the Tokyo Area's current system of forty-three wards.

After the war, the survivors had a whole ton of things to do.

All kinds of destroyed public facilities had to be rebuilt. The shortage of electricity needed to be solved. The overwhelming scarcity of food required rationing. Finally, new land needed to be secured for the

population that had reached a limit from all the many refugees flowing into Tokyo.

The idea that was picked by the Seitenshi at the time was building Mega-Floats in Tokyo Bay.

Although this type of construction project had been pursued proactively since the past, things were much different from before the war. Tokyo Bay had been invaded to the point that even its appearance on the map had changed.

Hence, the building currently towering before Rentaro's eyes was also one of the Mega-Floats.

The ground was covered by dense shadows of birds. Rentaro looked up to see the sun's blinding light. Forced to narrow his eyes and shield them with his hand, he allowed the seabirds' cries to hammer his eardrums.

Rentaro guessed that these birds gliding leisurely in the sky were black-tailed kittiwakes.

Presumably because their cries resembled that of cats, they were named kittiwakes, but even after hearing them so many times, Rentaro still felt that it sounded like the crying of babies.

The black-tailed kittiwake was very interesting. Like the herring gull, they would sometimes abduct chicks from other nests to tear apart and feed their own young, yet other times who would fail to distinguish the abducted chicks from their own, thus ending up raising them together. This clumsy behavior was especially amusing.

While decompressing the knowledge of animals inside his skull, Rentaro tried to think back, but ultimately, he shook his head suddenly and stopped escaping from reality.

Then he looked at the dark and sinister entrance directly in front of him.

Probably to shoddy work and cutting corners after the war, the building's white outer wall was cracking and flaking off in many places despite being less than ten years old.

This strange building combined a seaside sanitarium's sense of isolation as well as the flavor of endless evil.

—the Marine Penitentiary for Special Criminals, located in the Tokyo Area's Ward 32.

During the chaotic period after the war, the currency economy did collapse, even though only for a brief duration, and hyperinflation had happened with a single box of corn flakes costing close to ten thousand yen.

Thousand and ten thousand yen notes were mere pieces of paper to begin with. It is only with the "credibility" guaranteed by the Japanese government that these pieces of paper were accepted as large denominations of currency.

But because the Gastrea War caused all the currency circulating in the world to lose their liquidity, even the Tokyo Stock Exchange closed down as a result. No one knew who was "credible" anymore.

In the end, it was no strange sight to see capitalists, who used to have enough money to burn, rendered overnight into hobos scavenging from trash cans.

Naturally, there was rapid rise in the number of people turning to theft due to famine or lack of shelter.

Although virtually all of these people were committing crimes because they had no other option, humans were beings embodying good and evil in the same body to begin with.

Some people lost their sense of guilt after getting away from crimes scot-free, while others indulged themselves in the thrill of crime, unable to restrain themselves—

This prison on the sea was built for the sake of isolating the people who had crossed the line.

Rentaro looked back at the path he had walked just now. It was a trestle bridge, the sight of which whose length was dizzying already, on which a lonely guard house served as a security checkpoint.

Even situated in this outskirt zone near Tokyo Bay, there was no debris in this area. It was completely rebuilt. Taking a quick look in all directions, Rentaro even saw a seaside park built on the crescent shaped shore.

There were couples taking walks and mothers pushing strollers, as well as various club houses for the elderly scattered around. Probably a leisure venue for citizens.

Except for this one place, deliberately forgotten and isolated.

Taking out his CivSec license and giving his name at the reception, Rentaro asked for an urgent meeting with Litvintsev. The receptionist reacted with surprise.

After being asked to wait for a while, Rentaro saw an elderly prison guard emerge to ask him to "Come this way, please" and led the way.

Feeling like a battle was coming, Rentaro clenched his fist and followed.

"Wow, I never expected you to be so young, Mr. CivSec... You were the one who originally apprehended Litvintsev?"

Soon after passing through the second door, the prison guard leading the way finally spoke.

"Yeah, but it was only luck."

"Perhaps you may know already, but this place doesn't not incarcerate ordinary convicts. Only criminals who have been judged as impossible to rehabilitate are transferred here."

"I think so."

While saying that, Rentaro looked around.

There was no artificial lighting at all. The footsteps sounded exceptionally loud and clear in the dry air.

Spaced regularly, barred windows for providing natural light were very small, allowing sunlight to stream in diagonally.

There was an intense smell of the sea as well as the sounds of seagulls every now and then.

But if one were to examine the four corners of the ceiling carefully, one would notice the glint of security camera lenses. With numerous holes

on the empty floor underfoot, perhaps metal fences could be raised in emergency situations.

What surprised Rentaro was that there was a young girl mixed among the prison guards. She was sitting in a chair, hugging one leg with her knee drawn up, swaying her other leg impatiently.

A black spade was painted under her right eye in punk rocker style. Rentaro got a sense that her personality was not particularly good.

"So the security here even uses Initiators?"

"Sent by the IISO, even though we said we didn't need too many security staff."

Instantly turning his gaze towards the place occupied by darkness, Rentaro saw pairs of powerful eyes silently tracking their movements from a dark cage.

Rentaro did not know why these people were imprisoned and had no interest either. However, these people were certainly criminals without a doubt.

The silence felt even more terrifying.

"Mr. CivSec, please come this way."

Despite feeling creeped out by the gazes chasing him, Rentaro still passed through a small checkpoint with prison guards on watch at the end of the corridor.

With that, he had passed through three doors now. From the way things looked, the deeper they went, the more vile and serious the criminals locked away.

After walking out from the checkpoint, Rentaro suddenly noticed that the earlier security guard had disappeared. He looked back to see the guy standing at the entrance to the checkpoint without continuing forward.

"This is as far as I'll accompany you, so be careful, Mr. CivSec. The day that guy was admitted here, he choked me by the neck using his handcuffs while I was distracted. If help had arrived any later, I would've been killed."

"...Got it, thanks."

Turning his back to the prison guard who had his head bowed in fear, Rentaro stepped over the massive words of "C Block" spray painted on the floor, taking a step into the darkness.

To be honest, he was a bit afraid, but now that he had come this far, it was not like he could ask the prison guard to come over.

Rentaro wiped his sweaty palms on his pants.

The basic layout here was the same as the earlier blocks he had passed through but the gazes sticking to him were even worse than before, to the point that he could feel a suspension of killing intent, even the air felt especially heavy.

Just at this moment, a sound similar to bells ringing could be heard somewhere. Guided by the sound, Rentaro knew that his target was in the deepest part without needing to search deliberately.

As soon as he reached his destination, his first impression was how bright it was.

This was a single jail cell a size larger than all the other ones. The lighting window was relatively wide, almost illuminating the entire jail cell's walls of mortar.

A crude metal-framed bed. Simple shelves. The heavy hardcover books piled up on the shelves were titled in Cyrillic script.

Rentaro found the wind chimes tied to the prison bars. An occasional sea breeze caused the metal tongue of the bell to jump, producing lively sounds inside its glass vessel.

Naturally, this was the source of the bell sounds.

Then the guy sitting in a pipe chair, reading a book was—

Rentaro felt his blood vessels contract and could not help but clench his fist.

"It's been a while, Andrei Litvintsev."

Putting a bookmark into the book, the man closed it and returned it to the shelves next to him, then looked up.

"Long time no see, Rentaro Satomi."

His tenor voice only brought painful memories to Rentaro.

The guy's face looked out of place in relation to the black prison outfit, with his deep-set features and cleft chin. Under the sunlight, his blond hair was shining brightly.

The tracking anklet worn above his right foot faithfully conveyed the fear that the prison guards felt towards him.

"Why ask for me?"

"After what happened, I investigated many things about you."

Litvintsev moved his head, motioning for Rentaro to take a seat.

Keeping his gaze on the guy, Rentaro carefully pulled out one of the pipe chairs that were piled up against the wall of the passage and sat down. Just to be on the safe side, he deliberately kept himself three steps away from the prison bars.

Amidst the tense atmosphere, only the sound of wind chimes were sounding crisply and tactlessly.

"After defeating the Scorpion then Aldebaran and arresting me, you've truly made a name for yourself."

"A VIP like you, served three meals a day with free shelter, wouldn't have summoned me here just to taunt me, right?"

"Then how about we swap places?"

"I'm saying that you should count your lucky stars that you weren't sentenced to death."

Litvintsev grinned.

"There's no need to be so afraid. I'm not going to eat you suddenly."

"Looks like your eyes have gone bad after living in prison for too long."

As though showing off his composure from a position of advantage, Litvintsev deliberately slowed down his speech and said:

"Fear has its own smell. You are merely using anger to hide your fear."

"..."

Suppressing the wavering in his heart, Rentaro clenched his fists on his lap.

He lamented mentally how sad it was that Litvintsev was so much superior in these types of psychological warfare than him.

Andrei Litvintsev.

This spy had attempted to approach politicians in the Tokyo Area and bribe them, turning them into militants to stir up war against other Areas.

He investigated the Tokyo Area's heavy industries, state of the economy and national resources, providing the information to Russia. It was said that Russia even established a specialized intelligence agency in the Tokyo Area just to support him.

When he was arrested, only a total of five people were implicated, including his accomplices. Because all suspects adhered strictly to silence, the judge ran into trouble and could only sum up the case using an ambiguous motive of "disturbing the Tokyo Area's peace and leaking secrets to other Areas."

For such an expert spy to be arrested, it could be described as completely by chance.

Together with his accomplices, he was installing eavesdropping equipment at the home of a politician belonging to an opposing camp. As a result, the neighbor complained about the noise and hired civil security to take care of the problem, which was how Litvintsev came to be arrested all of a sudden.

After his arrest, Litvintsev's other crimes came into light, instantly causing an uproar. In the ensuing chaos, the prosecutor ended up stealing all the credit, leaving the Tendo Security Company with the lame accomplishment of "solving complaints regarding a neighbor's noise." Absolutely shameful.

"You were only able to apprehend me because my Initiator was not by my side. I hope you won't forget that."

"What a shameful excuse. How lamentable the fate of a high IP ranker. Rather, I should say formerly a high IP ranker."

"How is that princess lately?"

"You mean Her Highness Seitenshi? Did she ever visit?"

"A very brief one, but yes. A very delicate woman."

"Don't you go bullying her. She's a very devout believer of God."

"So there are people who still believe in God in such times?"

Litvintsev's voice turned gloomy.

"Are Belarusians all atheists?"

"By the time the Greater Minsk Area was plunged into hell, faith had already disappeared a long time ago."

"...Litvintsev, you know the Tokyo Area's current situation, right? The Tokyo Area has been unjustly accused of summoning Libra and a war against the Sendai Area could break out any moment. At this rate, in their desperation, the Sendai Area will surely make a move first. Once war begins, foreign powers are going to join in one after another, possibly turning this into a world war. In addition, this incident is very likely related to your former subordinates stealing Solomon's Ring and the Scorpion's Head. Of course, you're involved too."

"Why do you think that?"

"If it's you, bribing the staff here and making contact with the outside world should be a piece of cake."

Litvintsev shook his head with a wry smile.

"Just be a good boy and spit out where your friends are hiding, then we'll talk about reducing your sentence. Let me be clear up front, if you

don't hurry up and talk, the info will soon become worthless. Unlike you, I'm not sitting around with nothing to do."

Rentaro finished in one breath. How about that? He observed the other guy's reaction.

Although Rentaro was no expert negotiator, the speech he just delivered ought to deserve a passing grade.

To be honest, Rentaro had obtained prior permission from Seitenshi to deport Litvintsev back to Russia and forbid him from entering the five principal Areas of Japan to serve as a bargaining chip. But revealing all his cards at the start would be the worst thing you could do when negotiating.

As much as Rentaro had dropped out from that path, he had been groomed as a candidate to enter politics as a member of the Tendo family. He had done his homework beforehand to study the absolute rules of negotiation to some extent.

The rules of this prison were strict to an obsessive degree. One visitation per month and only limited to family. Items delivered to single jail cells were also tightly controlled.

Originally meant to be a social venue for inmates, private conversations were banned in the cafeteria. The ceilings were even fitted with tear gas that would be sprayed as soon as a riot occurred.

Roll call twelve times a day. Failures to respond would be mercilessly deemed an attempt to escape prison and subjected to time in the punishment room.

The sports ground where one could get a breath of fresh air was opened twice a week, but that place was surrounded by towering concrete walls manned by prison guards armed with real bullets, patrolling like hawks.

It was supposed to be a place where even time for catching one's breath would be hard to come by.

In fact, many convicts had attempted to escape, unable to bear this prison's harsh conditions, but there were no successful cases.

In contrast to the prison's run-down appearance, these were metaphorically walls of iron. Simply the beds of spikes installed on the ground were enough to serve as proof of its security.

Even vile criminals who had repeatedly engaged in robbery, murder and arson would cry like children as soon as they heard they were going to be sent here. As much as Litvintsev feigned calmness on the surface, Rentaro was certain that his half year of prison life must have been unbearable.

Given the chance to be released, he would take it even if it meant betraying his comrades.

Including the fact that he had named Rentaro for negotiations, this meant that he was willing to negotiate terms and conditions.

The above was what Rentaro had deduced beforehand as Litvintsev's psychological state.

As a basic rule, holding the fishing rod dangling the carrot in front of that guy's face, Rentaro was not going to give way easily. He must spin the guy in circles.

—However, despite knowing that in his mind, on a completely different dimension from these calculations, he was feeling a type of indescribable chill, stinging his temples.

He could not see any short-sighted anxiety in the man before him at all. Was this also an act? Or perhaps, Rentaro's thoughts had missed out something critical...

At this moment, Litvintsev giggled as though he could not suppress himself any further. Finally turning into a massive laugh of mockery.

"What are you laughing at?"

While feeling uneasy, Rentaro saw the prisoner in the cage glare at him with dark eyes.

"You seem to have mistaken something. I have no intention of negotiating terms with you."

"What...!?"

Rentaro doubted his own ears. What did this guy just say...?

Ignoring the dumbfounded Rentaro, Litvintsev continued:

"I did indeed tell government officials that I wanted to see you. That is not a lie. But I did not ask for you to negotiate."

"Then why on earth did you..."

Rentaro muttered in a hoarse voice.

Litvintsev stood up and walked over.

Despite knowing there were bars between them, Rentaro still shrank back reflexively and entered a combat stance. Leaning his face against the bars, Litvintsev spoke in a knowing tone of voice:

"Listen here. I will destroy the Tokyo and Sendai Areas next. The people you love will kill each other, get blown up, rolling on the ground with intestines squirting out like bugs, and all you can do is watch all this while hating your own helplessness."

Instantly, Rentaro felt an illusion as though himself was the one being caged.

The light streaming in diagonally only lit up Litvintsev's body below the neck. Almost completely dark, all that was left of his face was eyes giving off vicious light.

Rentaro was intimidated, completely unable to move. But in a corner of his numb mind, he still understood one point.

Rentaro's deductions were completely overturned from their premises.

This was not a negotiation.

Instead, this was a declaration of war.

"Take your own people and escape to another Area. This is the respect I offer you as the one who managed to arrest me once. If you don't heed my advice. you will witness a tragic hell worse than death."

"Stop fucking around!"

Noticing his hand moving, Rentaro immediately pulled out his handgun and aimed at Litvintsev between the eyes.

With the XD's muzzle pointed at his face, Litvintsev fell into a terrifying silence. Only those eyes of his were quietly piercing Rentaro.

"Why!? Why the heck are you doing this!? Are you controlling Libra just because you want the Tokyo Area to suffer the same fate as your former homeland? Why!?"

"Even though you caught me once, I won't lose again."

Just as Rentaro was wondering about a panicking cry coming from the side, he was suddenly tackled to the ground. His view shook intensely.

When he realized it was a prison guard who had charged in panic to stop him, two prison guards had snatched his weapon away and pinned his arms down from behind. Rentaro struggled violently for a while, but this only caused intense pain. As soon as he turned his neck forcibly, his joints would be restrained.

As for Litvintsev, he was staring at him with cold eyes.

While dragged away by the prison guards, Rentaro cursed "damn it."

He had been totally played for a fool

Originally thinking he was in control and storming in here—In the end, he was nothing more than a stupid clown.

In the end, what he instinctively felt before the meeting turned out to be correct.

He should have shot the guy to death on first sight. To Rentaro, this was the kind of nemesis he was.

After getting scolded harshly by the prison guards and told to leave, Rentaro was thrown out and suffering from an intense feeling of defeat.

Dragging his utterly exhausted body, he turned towards the trestle bridge and drawn to the calls of seagulls, looked up at the sunny sky.

Rentaro suddenly wondered whether Enju was having a good time at school or not.

Part 3

During roll call, Ms. Yagara's monotonous voice droned endlessly like reciting a prayer.

This obese teacher seemed completely defeated by today's hot and humid weather.

"Houzui Watanabe... Hmm, next, a girl. Enju Aihara... Oh dear, Aihara?"

As though urged by Ms. Yagara's voice, Momoka Hieda stole glance at the spot two seats away from her.

There was only an empty seat and desk with no signs of the friend she was looking for.

The sounds of waves was cleansing the soul. Listening to the calls of seagulls, she closed her eyes at the same time.

A faint sound of water flowing could be heard from behind the bumpy beech tree trunk she was leaning her back against.

Enju Aihara swung her outstretched legs while enjoying the prickly feeling coming from the grass. Her gaze settled on a building visible on the far side of the Tokyo Bay in the distance.

It was a marine prison connected via a long trestle bridge. Due to the evaporation of seawater, its reflection in the rippling water was wavering unsteadily.

Rentaro was probably inside right now, meeting the convict mentioned earlier.

Having only heard of the location, Enju skipped school today, finding this seaside park just by using the name.

Opening the bag next to her, she took out a sandwich she had bought at a convenience store.

Peeling off the wrapper, she took a bite and swallowed. However, to Enju who had gotten used to having meals as a social affair, eating alone made food taste worse.

Hearing laughter, she looked up to see a family of three visiting the park for recreation despite the tense times at hand. Holding the hands of who were probably her wryly smiling parents, a young girl was yelling "Hurry up, okay?" while dragging them forward.

The parents looked like their only intention was to take stroll in this setting of a seaside park, but for a child already used to stimulating entertainment such as social network gaming, this place was utterly boring.

Confronted with a happy family whom blessings ought to be offered to, Enju felt her feelings entering a turmoil.

Born as a Cursed Child, unable to find anywhere in the world to belong to, Enju always held complicated feelings towards other children who took their right to enjoy parental love for granted.

Although she normally did not notice these things, whenever she lowered her guard, the tiniest occurrence would break through her seal, causing negative memories to come pouring out.

The first to awaken in her ears was the acute sound of hitting. For a hallucination, this noise was far too realistic, making Enju's entire body tense involuntarily.

Two figures were maliciously staring down at her swollen cheeks.

They were the unforgettable Mr. and Mrs. Aihara.

This pair of foster parents hated talking to Enju, using physical strikes in place of language.

Depriving her of food, making her sleep in the kitchen, what they wanted was not Enju but the allowance paid to those who adopted orphans from the war.

"When setting the price on benevolence, one absolutely must not go too high or too low."

Enju recalled Sumire's past explanation.

"Take blood donation as an example. It is respected precisely because it is unrewarded sacrifice. Suppose a very cheap reward was given, it would hurt the donators' pride. Conversely, an excessively high reward would start black market activity such as the selling of blood.

"Although the first Seitenshi was universally acclaimed as an enlightened ruler after her death, one mistake in her policies has been pointed out.

"Namely, she set the monthly allowance for adopting war orphans too high."

Most likely, the first Seitenshi had established this policy with 100% benevolence, but in hindsight, the greedy people who adopted Enju from the orphanage were jackals like the Aihara couple.

Naturally, parents devoid of love could not possibly be good parents. Their only expectation of Enju was "as long as she was still breathing." Apart from that, all they did was starve her or beat her as they pleased.

Foster parents like those could not possibly establish good parent-child relationships. Breakdown was inevitable.

Enju recalled herself in the past, in the living room, her shoulders heaving up and down intensely from her violent panting.

The dirty tatami floor was completely destroyed. The foster father, dressed in semi-long underpants, had his face beaten in, unconscious. The foster mother with the face like a seal lion's was also beaten severely in the face, struggling to retreat while sitting on her ass on the floor.

Enju's pair of eyes were scorching red. Blood was also dripping from her tightly clenched fists. She believed she was crying at the time.

After spending a year desperately trying to earn their love, but getting no return no matter how hard she tried, that final line was eventually crossed in their relationship.

"Y-You're on a one-way trip to hell! You'll be treated as an antisocial red-eye from now on, to be driven out from society! Serves you right!"

Baring her teeth and snarling like a baboon, the foster mother cursed, making Enju come to her senses and flee, driven by fear.

After escaping to Ward 39, Enju engaged in every kind of crime apart from murder in order to survive. Getting shot by handguns or shotguns in retaliation happened not just once or twice.

After finding out that Enju was a Cursed Child, the orphanage where Enju lived before being adopted by the Aihara family had wanted to get rid of her a long time ago. Hence, she could not possibly go back there.

Enju's gaze became vicious.

Fearing malice from others, she kept her power released at all times.

She was unable to trust anyone.

After some unknown amount of time passed, one day, some of her fellow Cursed Children told her that corrosion rate suppression drugs could be obtained for free just by becoming an Initiator, and meals would be guaranteed henceforth. Hence, Enju tried enlisting.

Only now could Enju admit honestly that in the very beginning, she did harbor some hopes for the Promoter assigned to supervise and assist her.

However, as soon as she saw the sorry-looking Promoter brought in by the IISO staff, Enju could not help but sigh.

That guy was not only deplorable in appearance but also had an attitude like a little punk as well as being incurably poor.

By the time she met the company CEO whom she wondered if her breasts had sucked away all nutrients, Enju went as far as to vow secretly in her heart never to open her heart to these two.

Enju took a forceful bite of the sandwich she was gripping tightly.

Why was she recalling such things now?

It must be because of dinner last night when Rentaro had mentioned the "Aihara family" again after so long.

In the end, Enju had received nothing from her foster parents apart from her family name. Truly a sad relationship.

And this time, she had escaped again. Last time it was away from her foster parents whereas this time it was her classmates.

"How disgusting, eyes glowing red. I hope people like that don't come to school."

"Scram back to your ghetto in the outskirt zones."

"So creepy, stop disguising as humans, okay?"

The many cursing profanities said to her over the years were replaying in the depths of her ears, surfacing together with the faces of hatred directed towards her. Although eyelids existed to block off seeing things she did not want to see, there were no "earlids" to block away sounds she did not wish to hear.

What pulled Enju out of her endless vortex of self-rejection was a mumbled scream of "Ah—!"

Enju looked back to see a girl, a size younger than herself, tearfully looking up at a beech tree on the side.

Following her gaze, Enju finally understood the situation.

A bright red balloon had apparently escaped its owner's hand, getting caught in the beech branches during its quest for freedom.

However, the four-meter beech was too tall. Even an adult would not be able to reach the balloon.

"Is that balloon very important to you?"

Enju leaned over and asked. The girl faltered a bit from being spoken to suddenly but nodded in the end.

Enju swiftly looked around. No one was passing by at the moment—Perhaps it was okay right now?

"Close your eyes for a moment."

"Eyes? Why?"

Enju convinced the girl who was utterly confused and made her close her eyes.

"Don't open them, okay?"

Enju shut her eyes and focused her awareness in the depths of her abdomen and took a deep breath, then finally when exhaling, she released her power in one breath. Her body suddenly felt light as though gravity had weakened, accompanied by a feeling of omnipotence as though her limbs were expanding.

Bending her knees gingerly, she took a leap. Accompanied by a rising feeling, she found the bright red helium balloon before her eyes by the time she noticed.

Grabbing it effortlessly and returning to the ground, Enju tapped the girl's shoulder.

Timidly opening her eyes, the girl was staring at the balloon presented towards her. What was she feeling?

Worry, surprise, amazement, joy.

Enjy enjoyed the sight of that complicated expression, feeling overjoyed inside.

"Thank you, miss!"

Enju puffed her chest out proudly.

"That's right! I am older than you and an amazing lady."

The girl tilted her head, probably puzzled by what Enju meant, but still smiling.

At this moment, the girl's mother ran over and thanked many times politely. After nagging at the girl a few times, she took her away. The girl waved to Enju.

Seeing them off with a delighted feeling, Enju concluded what a great feeling it was to help others.

"You must be a Cursed Child, aren't you?"

Feeling electrified, Enju turned around to face the voice's source.

Standing behind her was a girl of roughly the same age as her.

She had a head of dazzling silver hair. Dressed in a white blouse with ruffles and a black skirt, she looked like a well-bred young lady. Her highly distinctive ice-blue eyes shone with the light of intellect.

Enju broke out in cold sweat, her entire body tensing while wondering if she was seen just now.

Whenever ordinary people found out she was a Cursed Child, a great commotion always resulted with a crowd gathering. Then further developments were unpredictable.

"Please hold on."

Just as Enju was about to turn around and flee, the girl stopped her with a stern and dignified voice.

The girl covered her eyes with her right hand then suddenly moved her hand away.

Those cold, ice-blue eyes had turned into glimmering rubies.

Enju gasped.

"You too?"

The girl nodded then covered her eyes with her right hand again. By the time she moved her hand away, her eyes had returned to their original color.

"I never expected to meet one of us so near a Monolith."

The girl was about to salute when she put her hand down as though recalling something.

"What are you doing in this kind of place?"

"What about you...?"

Unable to admit she was skipping class, Enju answered ambiguously.

Unable to state her reason candidly either, the girl likewise bowed her head.

Silence descended upon the conversation when suddenly there was a rumbling.

The silver-haired girl frantically covered her stomach, her face going red.

"Excuse me, that looks very delicious."

Following the girl's gaze, Enju saw the half-eaten sandwich in her own hand.

Ten minutes later—

Enju and the girl were sitting side by side on a bench under a tree's shade, each holding a taiyaki cake in their hands.

Feeling incredulous, the girl was examining this type of food, baked in a fish-shaped mold, from all sorts of angles.

"The surface appears to be flour, but there doesn't seem to be any roasted fish used as filling inside, right?"

"You've never had this before?"

The girl nodded with an expression of complicated feelings.

"It's red bean paste inside. Very yummy."

The girl went "oh" with curiosity, but soon, her eyebrows drooped in the next instant in dismay.

"But payment..."

"My treat."

The girl was still staring at the taiyaki in hesitation, but drool suddenly dripped from the corner of her tightly pursed lips.

This was probably the critical hit. The girl turned to Enju again and bowed deeply.

"Thank you very much for the treat. It was my mistake for failing to bring extra activity funds when going out today."

"Activity funds?"

Ignoring Enju's question, the girl took a large bite.

"Oh, it's very hot so you should eat slower..." Enju was about to remind her when the girl had reacted strongly.

"—!"

Covering her mouth with both hands, the girl twisted her body.

"Spit it out! Quick!"

"I-It ish only a bit hot."

"A bit, but—"

"—a bit hot!"

As though trying to convince herself, the girl yelled with tears glimmering in the corners of her eyes.

Keeping the mouthful in her closed mouth for a while, she finally chewed forcibly and swallowed.

"A-Also, I must not waste what you paid for."

In accordance with the saying, "a burnt child dreads the fire," the girl was blowing at the taiyaki excessively, waiting for it to cool completely before delivering it to her mouth in trepidation.

"Hmm, I see now, it is quite delicious. It is just that my mouth has a numb feeling from being burnt, so I cannot discern the taste clearly."

Seeing this girl offer her comments with a serious face, Enju could not help but burst out in laughter.

Enju was about to call to the girl when she realized she did not know the girl's name.

"I am called Enju, Enju Aihara. Your name is...?"

Mouth open, about to bite the taiyaki again, the girl instantly paused in her motion with a thoughtful look. Finally, she raised her eyebrows fully apologetically.

"Enju, I am truly sorry. Due to certain reasons, I am unable to answer. Rather, I might be causing trouble for you down the line if I were to tell you my name, so I am reluctant to say it."

Reluctant to say it... Enju took some time to understand her intent.

"Why is that...?"

The girl looked up at the clock in the seaside park.

"It is almost time. Perfect. Enju, may I borrow a little of your time for the next while?"

The faint red setting sun gradually tilted west, making the surface of the sea glimmer as though it was on fire.

What lay beneath the sea surface was already too dark to see.

Instead of feeling like there was no place to return home, Enju felt a surging sense of excitement, difficult to describe.

Enju tried to touch the wet surface of the warm water and brought her fingers to her mouth. As expected, her tongue felt stimulated by a sense of saltiness that numbed her throat.

Moving back and forth, the waves struck the boat, rocking her view while making a light noise.

Enju twisted her hips and looked up at the great distance to land, feeling a faint sense of unease in her heart.

"Is it okay with just us two?"

"No problem."

The silver-haired girl was sharing the same boat, smiling as though trying to put her at ease without stopping her arms from rowing the

oars. Sitting face to face, her gaze seemed to be directed towards Enju, but in fact, she was looking behind Enju.

Because her eyes turned red when her power was released, she probably worried whether people taking strolls in the seaside park would see them.

Enju and the girl had come to Tokyo Bay.

Enju was starting to regret her impulsive actions.

Partially coerced by the girl to the pier, she inexplicably boarded the boat the girl had concealed beforehand. However, this inconspicuous little boat was the type that should be used in a pond or some body of water without waves.

Besides, they were two little kids on a journey. If spotted by tourist ships or fishing boats, wouldn't it cause a great commotion?

"It's time you explained the reason for coming here."

"Because I would like to spend time with you, Enju."

Enju did not know how to respond to the girl's half-smiling dodging of her question. Even Enju could understand that she was lying just now.

Sighing, Enju listened to the waves in order to think.

A steam whistle was heard from the distant sky.

Enju looked out into the western sky and brought up a completely unrelated topic.

"Y-You, what is your view on the issue of Cursed Children mixing themselves among ordinary people to go to school?"

"Why are you asking for my opinion on this?"

Enju was instantly at a loss for words, but she finally revealed everything.

Including her own origins, how she had been chased out of elementary school as soon as her identity came to light, and how she was troubled by her past memories, unable to become a part of her current school, also her sense of guilt when hiding things from friends... She revealed everything.

While speaking, Enju wondered why she would tell this girl all this when they had only met just earlier. If one were to ask who was the Cursed Child closest to her, it ought to be Tina instead...

The girl with the strict and prudent personality closed her eyes for a while before finally opening them again.

"I am very sorry, Enju, in most likelihood, I am unable to provide an effective solution to your situation."

Enju shook her head wryly.

"I am already very happy just from the fact that you listened to it all... Just from the fact that you didn't laugh."

"By the time I was born, my homeland was already gone."

Enju suddenly looked at her. The girl had just stood up. As though gazing into the distance, her eyes were staring at the seagulls flying in the air.

"My homeland vanished due to the Gastrea War. I was born in a neighboring country, but that country had severe issues with famine and discrimination. Living there was very difficult."

The girl paused for a while then continued:

"Speaking of human lives, the more impoverished and destitute, the closer to animals the way people live. Nothing more than sleeping, eating and producing offspring.

"Enju, did you know? Even if you start with same person, raised in a well-provided versus a starving environment, the latter's IQ would end up at least ten points lower. Although IQ would recover if conditions were to improve, the more destitute the more one would lack the intellect to escape tragic conditions. This is why people all say that poverty is a vicious cycle.

"I was very fortunate. I was picked up by auspicious coincidence to receive a high-quality education, thus allowing me to learn how to liberate myself from the shackles of the three base desires, to engage in thought with rationality. This is precisely the only thing that separates humans from other animals."

Holding down her beautiful hair that was being blown in disarray by the sea breeze, the girl turned her head.

"Although I am very hesitant to make comparisons to the hardship you have experienced in the past, whenever you feel sad, do try recalling the fact that you are not the only one who has experienced such suffering."

Was it right to use people facing greater misfortune as mental support? Wasn't this mindset equivalent to secretly looking down on them with a sense of superiority?

Probably reading these thoughts from Enju's face, the girl shook her head gently.

"You are wrong, Enju. Sometimes the annoying web of human relationships also serves as a net for distributing and absorbing sadness from the past. In times like these, it is nothing shameful to make the best use out of social networks."

Instantly, Enju's troubled soul felt lighter. The sky, approaching night, seem to grow brighter.

Gazing at her own palm, Enju opened and closed it.

"How incredible. My chest doesn't feel as tight anymore."

"I am honored to be of help."

The girl partially closed her eyes and smiled.

Enju also smiled happily.

"You are such a good person. Come to my house next time and I'll introduce my Promoter to you. He is so lovey-dovey with me that he never lets me get any sleep at night!"

"Looks like you were fortunate enough to encounter a good Promoter."

"Is your Promoter a good person?"

"Indeed, most excellent."

Seeing the girl speak with happiness as though she had been praised herself, Enju wondered what her identity was exactly.

Her excessively pale skin and silver hair clearly did not resemble Japanese looks. Enju was practically certain she was a foreign Initiator.

Due to disputes over varanium rights, foreign Initiators apparently visited the Tokyo Area quite often, but as long as they refrained from displaying their powers, it was not possible for Enju and them to identify each other as Initiators.

"An Initiator like you must be very strong, always making the right decisions."

Hearing Enju's casual comment, the girl's expression distorted timidly.

"Nothing of that sort."

The girl sat down dejectedly and stopped talking, pretending to be focusing on rowing the oars.

Just as Enju worried whether she had said something wrong and leaned forward, she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her head.

Looking around, she soon found the reason.

The giant jet-black walls of varanium towered on the left and right.

Coming to the seaside park, Enju had considered the locations of the Monoliths already, picking the center between the two Monoliths where the varanium magnetic field was weakest, but while traveling on boat, they had apparently unintentionally approached a spot near her limit.

"Don't you feel uncomfortable?"

"Not yet. Does it hurt for you at this distance...? How sensitive of you. Pardon me for being rude, Enju, but may I ask what your internal corrosion rate might be?"

"Around 24.4%, what about you?"

"Similar."

The girl showed a troubled face.

"How odd. I recall that reactions to varanium magnetic fields were not supposed to differ significantly for those of similar corrosion rates."

"Really?"

Speaking of which, Enju remembered how Tina's internal corrosion rate was roughly the same percentage as hers yet she was more sensitive to varanium magnetic fields than Tina.

"However, it might be an issue with constitution. Ah, we have arrived."

Enju looked around but could not find any dry land to alight.

"My destination is that building over there."

The girl brought out a pair of binoculars from the side while pointing towards the land.

Although the sky was getting dim, without needing binoculars, Enju could still see the floating prison that loomed bigger than what she could see from the seaside park.

"You have things to do at that prison?"

The girl's eyes widened from surprise.

"How startling. I never expected you would also know this place is a prison."

The girl looked at her watch at this time, then took a prone position and ducked down, raising her binoculars to say:

"It is almost time."

Unable to get the situation, Enju cocked her head slightly. But suddenly finding another boat sailing nearby, Enju also lowered her head involuntarily.

However, the small boat resembling a fishing boat did not take any notice of them, simply passing by in the distance. For some reason, it circled in a big detour before approaching the back of the building, mooring itself at what seemed to be a small loading bay of the Mega-float.

"Tethered mines were apparently placed near that area to prevent the escape of convicts, possible to detonate remotely from land. The boat just took a detour along a path without mines, probably carrying large loads that are difficult to transport by land routes."

Seeing the girl wave to her, Enju went over and took the binoculars handed over to her.

"Security is tight as expected. Enju, do you see it? What appears at first glance to be an old building is actually covered with all kinds of sensors and biometric verification, a collective of state-of-the-art security systems. The wall surface looks eroded but the interior is reportedly made with processed varanium. It must be quite astounding in toughness."

The girl was explaining with slight excitement, completely ignoring Enju staring at the side of her face.

"Why did you come here to look at the prison?"

The girl's expression collapsed and she deliberately turned away to avoid eye contact.

"Uh, I suppose you could consider me a prison aficionado..."

Seeing the girl act flustered, Enju observed with a complicated expression.

The girl most likely intended to come here alone originally. But after meeting Enju, she came up with the impromptu idea of going together.

Most likely because rowing the boat alone would look more suspicious from afar than having two people, which might be why she picked Enju to fill up the numbers.

If that really were the case, Enju was supposed to feel angry. However, she did not feel anything like that.

To be honest—Enju was already quite smitten with her.

Enju recalled what Rentaro had said once about cherishing friends if you meet someone you want to be friends for a lifetime.

"You must have difficult circumstances. I won't pry."

The girl's eyelashes fluttered down.

"Thank you, Enju. But it is time for us to return. I am very sorry for dragging you out here today."

The kittiwakes meowed in the air while the girl's face was illuminated red by the setting sun.

"Will we meet again?"

"Most likely not. For both of us, it would be a kind of good fortune if we were not to meet again."

Until the very end, a mysterious smile remained on the girl's face.

"My name is Yulia."

"Huh?"

Brushing her beautiful hair over her ears, the silver-haired girl smiled and said:

"My name is Yulia Kochenkova."

Part 4

"Yulia Kochenkova."

Looking at the photo that had popped up, Seitenshi spoke:

"Andrei Litvintsev's Initiator, serving under the 'Witches Squadron,' a Russian special operations team consisting exclusively of Initiators, the strongest Initiator of the former Belarus, also a girl carrying cheetah factor in her genes."

The time was after 7pm. In the Satomi home where the lights were off, the crystal medium's blue light was shining randomly all over the place like yesterday, showing a holo-window.

Rentaro clicked the photo's holo-projection in the air and instantly resulted in magnification.

Probably taken secretly, the photo showed a girl who was looking to the left side, her tense lips showing indomitable will.

"A so-called Model Cheetah..."

"A speed enhanced type. In other words, you can consider her the same type of Initiator as Miss Enju."

Rentaro sighed in admiration.

Speaking of cheetahs, they were capable of reaching a top running speed of 110 km/h. Needless to say, they were the fastest predators in the animal world.

Although the combat ability of Initiators could not be determined solely by the animal factor within them, even so, a cheetah would be like a thoroughbred in the world of Initiators.

"Ranking?"

Seitenshi fell silent for a moment before murmuring a number she seemed quite reluctant to disclose.

Rentaro rubbed his arms due to feeling a chill.

Suppose that number was not exaggerated, then the job he was taking on might be unprecedented in harshness.

"You have not encountered her before, right, Mr. Satomi?"

"If we had clashed directly with this girl half a year ago, Enju and I would have been killed for sure."

Rentaro answered with a suffering look. Seitenshi also fell silent, feeling the severity of the situation, taking a sip of the tea on the low table.

"Ten years ago, when Belarus was facing the tragedy of a great extinction from the viruses released by the King of Pestilence, Yulia Kochenkova's mother fled desperately to Russia. The child was born in a refugee camp established by the Russian government, but the mother died from puerperal fever. If only the refugee camp had sufficient medical environments, her mother would not have died."

"...How are Cursed Children treated in Russia?"

Seitenshi shook her head, greatly depressed.

"Close to the worst possible situation. Besides, the most populous colony in Russia&—sh;the Moscow Area&—sh;was already shouldering massive financial strain from unconditionally accepting Belarusian refugees to begin with. This heavy burden fell upon the Russian citizens, causing widespread discontent among the populace.

"Furthermore, rumors claimed that the Belarusian refugees might be infected with slow-acting viruses spread by the King of Pestilence, hence something akin to a caste system rose up in Russia after the war.

"The refugees from Greater Minsk were regarded as untouchables of the lowest caste. Among them, Cursed Children, known as 'Witch Kindred' in neighboring countries, were not even treated as human at all.

"Once people realized that the Gastrea outside were a threat, only then were there calls to assemble a 'Witches Squadron.' When Kochenkova was picked up, she was almost on the verge of death. Reportedly, she was cowering in a dark alley, eating rotten food, without even the strength to shoo away flies that were on her face."

Seitenshi lowered her gaze.

Having known her for some already, Rentaro could understand what Seitenshi was thinking at this moment. With almost complete certainty, he guessed that she was feeling compassion and heartache for those who were unable to find salvation.

Although he absolutely did not think it was a waste of energy, occasionally, he would encounter problems when sacrifices of lives were necessary.

However, she had always resisted this.

Should she be called stubborn or a saint who was still reaching out to touch the question that Rentaro had long given up on thinking about due to fatigue...

Rentaro halted his thoughts and asked "Then what?"

"So she became who she is now?"

"Yes. After that, she received a high-quality education in the squadron, for which she is deeply grateful. Reportedly, it was during this time when she met Litvintsev."

Seitenshi turned towards Rentaro again at this time.

"Mr. Satomi, what kind of person do you think Litvintsev is? Please share your thoughts even if it is just your personal opinion."

"That guy is undoubtedly a mastermind. Someone dangerous. His brain is abnormal too."

Rentaro was reminded of his meeting with Litvintsev during the daytime, biting his lip in chagrin.

Damn it, when clearly there were very few days left.

Just at this moment, Rentaro's tightly clenched fist, resting on his knee, was suddenly covered by something warm.

Rentaro looked up in fright to see that Seitenshi had come to his side without him knowing. That pale and pretty face was so close. Fearfully, he looked at his right hand to see Seitenshi's smooth-textured full-length glove over his fist.

"It is not over yet. Place your bet on tomorrow."

"O-Okay."

Looking up at him from below with lovely endearing eyes, her pale, tender and smooth face, together with those moist and gorgeous lips, only separated from the tip of his nose by mere centimeters. Rentaro could not help but shrink his head away.

This Sentenshi, beautiful to the point that it was rumored that rich men were willing to exchange their total wealth for a pair of her lace gloves, was breathing her warm breath against his neck.

Late at night, in a man's room illuminated by the haphazard light from a crystal medium, the two of them alone in this kind of situation, wasn't she a bit too unguarded?

Looking at her, Rentaro wanted to scold her for lacking in risk awareness, but Seitenshi tilted her head in puzzlement, unaware of why she was being stared at, and asked: "What is the matter, Mr. Satomi?"

Attacked with guilt for his vulgar thoughts, Rentaro turned his gaze to Yulia's photo to escape.

"...Almost certainly, this girl must have infiltrated the Tokyo Area already, right?"

"She has completely shaken off all surveillance tailing her. Capturing her whereabouts again would be very difficult."

At this moment, the room suddenly went bright. The crystal media also switched off automatically.

"I have returned!"

Rentaro looked back to see Enju pressing the light switch at the entrance and removing her shoes.

"I made a new Initiator friend today. Do you want to hear about it, Rentaro?"

Although he definitely felt curious, Rentaro waved his hand in front of his face to express refusal due to the despairing Initiator topic of conversation just now.

"Miss Enju, welcome home."

Seitenshi greeted Enju with a gentle and demure smile.

But for some reason, Enju was staring at Seitenshi with a complicated look.

"Your Highness Seitenshi, aren't you mistaking yourself for Rentaro's newly wedded wife?"

"What?"

Enju turned herself towards Rentaro and declared angrily:

"Rentaro, I want the usual 'welcome home kiss.'"

"There nothing like that usually at all."

Enju stomped her feet on the spot and bounced up and down in fury.

"Just hurry up and kiss me, okay!?"

Rentaro had no idea why she was throwing a fit, but feeling annoying, he ignored Enju, pushing her towards the sink and making her wash her hands and rinse her mouth properly first.

Holding her cup, Enju suddenly poked her head out from behind the sink.

"Rentaro, I want to skip school tomorrow to help find the terrorists' base, okay?"

"Are you saying your school is still having lessons tomorrow?"

Magata High had already announced tomorrow as a day off due to the news concerning the King of Pestilence. Rentaro had just received news of that.

"Mmm-hmm. We're going on a school trip to a power plant in an outskirt zone tomorrow. I think the teacher said something like 'since we survived the Third Kantou Battle in the end, then something major like a war isn't going to happen this time, right?'"

Rentaro was shocked.

He had apparently enrolled Enju into a very outrageous school, but immediately, he concluded this might be a good opportunity.

"Enju, you should still go to school tomorrow. It wasn't easy transferring to a new school, so you have to prioritize working hard to fit in there. You don't need to worry about us."

"But at this rate, war will..."

Placing his palm on Enju's head, Rentaro patted lightly.

"Don't worry, I'll definitely call you when I need your power."

Although she was still not at ease, in the end, Enju nodded.

Enju had already been expelled from school twice already.

Rentaro absolutely refused to let it happen a third time.

Part 5

The sea breeze blew through the gaps in the bars, causing the wind chime to ring.

The in depths of the endless darkness surrounding the moon, the sound of waves persisted together with the pungent smell of the tide that almost smelled like burning.

In the darkness after lights out, Andrei Litvintsev was sitting on the bed with his eyes closed, counting the sound of waves.

In the single jail cell opposite, bathed in moonlight, the burly man whose physique was like a pig's was unable to sleep, scratching his belly with his prison wear pulled up.

The sound of weeping and muttering could be heard from other cells.

After an indeterminate period of time, his consciousness awakened from the boundary between sleep and reality.

Instantly, a quiet call of "Captain" prompted him to silently open his eyes. Outside the rusted bars of the cage, a pair of bright eyes appeared. No, he could tell that behind that person, there were a number of people on standby even though they were subduing their breaths.

"How punctual."

He got up and went up to the bars. The electronic lock opened as though by magic. Accompanied by footsteps, the late night visitors entered this single jail cell that was definitely not spacious, entering formation neatly.

He counted five men and two girls.

"It's been a while, Captain."

The fully equipped man's voice was emotional while he took off his helmet. Litvintsev recognized his face. Following the man, the others all took off their helmets and saluted.

Litvintsev nodded and looked at their faces in turn.

"Max, Misha, also Sanja. You're here. Where's Yulia?"

"Here."

In the dark, another girl entered the single jail cell. Her ice-blue eyes and head of silver hair shone in the moonlight. Standing extremely straight, she saluted him.

After saluting, Yulia's expression instantly distorted. Hugging her petite upper body around Litvintsev's waist, she buried her face into him.

"I missed you so much, Captain."

"Situation?"

"Everything according to your orders."

Probably recalling she was still in a mission, Yulia took a step back and knelt down.

"I shall support my comrades in securing the control room."

Standing up, she turned around and silently disappeared. Taking her place, Max stepped forward and saluted.

"Please take care of things in twenty seconds. The electronic locks imprisoning all the inmates will be released thereafter to cause momentary chaos during which our boat will arrive for us to escape. The invasion operation will probably be discovered very quickly."

As though with perfect timing, noisy bells suddenly rang. The sleeping inmates all jumped up due to the unusual situation and made troubled noises.

"Speak of the devil."

Max put on his helmet again and released the safety on his rifle.

"Please hurry, taking point is our job. The Head and the Ring are already prepared, so please enjoy the final scene with your own eyes."

Someone circled around behind him and draped his favorite coat on his shoulders over his prison uniform.

Litvintsev swept his gaze across his comrades' faces in order again.

"Let's move out, for our cherished wish."

Following his comrades who were walking in front with lowered stances and rifles on their backs, Litvintsev strolled out with a swagger.

Woken up by the alarm, the prison was plunged into a vortex of turmoil.

The spiked floors meant to activate immediately to prevent prisoners from escaping were not raised. Neither was communication with the outside possible.

Noticing the abnormality, the prison guards rushed to the control room but were shocked by the spray of bullets waiting for them—

—Thunderous gunshots were heard while sparks flew from the steel table used for cover.

One of the prison guards roared angrily at the other guards, over the sound of gunshots.

"This ain't working! Those guys blocking in front of the control room are professional soldiers! This kind of equipment cannot win!"

"Then what are we gonna do!?"

The guards peeked out from behind the barricade to fire their shotguns whenever there were openings, but were always greeted by a large amount of bullets immediately, forcing them to shrink back.

Damn it. Someone cursed.

Naturally, prison guards were not professional soldiers.

Although they were barely equipped with weapons for putting down riots, compared to well-trained and obvious professionals, they had no chance of winning at all.

Just as a prison guard was clutching his head in a quandary, the gunshots suddenly stopped. Finding it suspicious, the prison guard looked out.

He saw a helmeted man tossing something into the air. Seeing that spherical object, the prison guard could only feel terror.

—A fragmentation grenade.

Shrinking his head back and expecting his entire body to be torn apart with pain, he heard an impact followed by an explosion. Hiding behind the barricade, the prison guards felt the shockwave while dust from construction materials filled the air.

"Hurry and escape, you guys are too weak!"

I'm still alive?

The prison guard opened his eyes in amazement to see a petite girl's back in front of him. She was standing there, holding a 60cm-long varanium cutlass in each hand.

The girl's earrings shook when she looked back. The guard could also see the spade painted under her right eye.

"Oh right, we still have an Initiator!"

The girl went hmph, raising her chin as though in boredom.

"I am Ritsu Urabe, IP ranking 550. By the way, mister, hurry and leave the building to call for reinforcements. I'll handle these guys."

Although the prison guard felt uncomfortable about mixing an Initiator in their workplace, after seeing her kick the grenade away just now, he was stunned for a few seconds.

"G-Got it. There are two enemies blocking the way to the control room. You take care."

After seeing the prison guard leave and pat a fellow guard's shoulder, urging him to retreat as well, Ritsu faced forward again.

Grinding her teeth horizontally, she smiled ferociously. Someone behind the barricade also took action.

Then with a violent muzzle flash, bullets flew towards her.

However, Ritsu jumped away, predicting the opponent's attack beforehand.

Amidst the flying bullets, she sidestepped while charging forward, chopping through the approaching barricade in an instant.

The enemy inside reacted with a shocked look.

Without giving him the chance to regain composure, she buried her blade into the guy's shoulder as though having fun. Making a muffled scream, the guy dropped his rifle.

Then the girl jumped up, driven by beast-like instincts.

Instantly, Ritsu's former location was pierced by rifle fire with a scattering of construction materials.

"You've picked the wrong foe!"

Spinning her body, she kicked the ceiling, charging at the enemy firing at her, slashing diagonally with her left and right cutlasses as soon as she landed.

Ritsu's varanium cutlasses easily sliced open the bulletproof vest, inflicting incapacitating injuries to the enemy.

"Ga... ah..."

Victory was decided. The masked man keeled over with a splatter of blood, looking up at her in apparent chagrin.

Ritsu kept licking her lips. Seeing the struggling on enemies who looked down on her really gave her a sense of indescribable glee.

"I don't really want to kill you yet. There's so much I'd like to interrogate afterwards."

Just as she was about to turn around and enter the control room, she looked back due to sensing killing intent.

As expected, a girl slowly emerged from the depths of the corridor.

Silver hair matched with calm, ice-blue eyes, plus a khaki military uniform.

In a different setting, one might mistake her for a lost and delicate child, naturally not someone who should be appearing in this kind of battlefield.

The enemy terrorists were apparently using an Initiator too.

The girl slowly looked at her fallen comrades on the ground and made a look of comprehension.

Standing on opposing sides, the two Initiators became enemies.

Even without words, both sides knew clearly that bloodshed was coming after this.

The girl took out her weaponry.

At this moment, Ritsu could not help but burst into laughter.

"What's that? You're going to fight with that kind of weapon?"

In the shape of knuckle guards, the metal rods fitted on her arms were attached to four hooked claws each. There was a ring at the base of the claws where the thumbs could be inserted.

Known as tiger claws, this type of concealed weapon was specialized for assassins, reportedly capable of leaving lacerations akin to being torn by a ferocious beast's sharp claws with a single thrust and swipe. Both of her hands were wearing these.

The material was varanium. Although one could expect high mobility given the lightness in weight, there was a lack of reach, merely an outdated relic of the past.

"IP rank 550, Model Shark. I am Ritsu Urabe."

Ritsu introduced herself customarily and the girl responded politely.

In the next instant, Ritsu made an "Eh?" sound.

Tilting her head in puzzlement, thinking her opponent had not heard properly, the silver-haired girl lowered her center of gravity in a combat stance.

Then she stared straight at Ritsu.

"IP rank 77, Model Cheetah. My name is Yulia Kochenkova. I shall not hold back."

Part 6

Shoving his wallet into the taxi driver's hand without checking how much cash was in it, he rushed out of the car. The unexpectedly blinding sunlight greeted him, forcing him to squint.

The air was still very cold but the sun had already risen from the eastern sky.

The waves were making refreshing sounds as they broke. This scene was probably not going to change even a thousand years later.

Only a day had passed since he had last visited this floating prison, yet such a momentous change had taken place.

A slight stench of blood was mixed in the smell of the salty tide.

His body was filled with quiet tension.

After crossing the long trestle bridge, he could start seeing the backs of a large crowd that had gathered to watch as well as people who should be policemen.

Pushing through the human wall to reach the police tape, he was greeted by a frowning police officer who approached.

"Hey, this place is off-limits—"

Before the guy could finish, he fished out his CivSec license and tossed it over.

The elderly policeman caught it and instantly raised an eyebrow with an annoyed look.

"What's with trying to edge in on our turf? This ain't a Gastrea case this time."

"But it's very likely related that Initiators were involved. I do have the right to enter, all things said."

"Hmph."

The policeman pulled the tape with displeasure.

After he passed through the police tape and demanded to see the one in charge. The policeman raised his chin, said "follow me" and started to walk on his own.

Drawn by the noisy hustle and bustle, he swiveled his neck to look around.

This artificial island, normally inhabited only by prison guards, their family and the inmates, was now packed full of crime scene investigators, district police officers and mobile investigation teams. In a different setting, this level of activity would be like a joyous festival.

Beneath the crape myrtle's white flowers blooming next to the wall, seeds had flown in from who knew where. The almost blood-red petals of the red spider lily were also fluttering in the wind.

Blood was splattered in that area with human-shaped chalk outlines and countless bullet holes.

"...Does that outline belong to which side?"

"Who knows."

After entering the prison, the marks left behind by the gun fights were even more terrifying.

Suddenly, a Special Assault Team armed with bulletproof vests, assault rifles and light machine guns came head on and passed by.

Probably having spent the whole night subduing rioting inmates without a chance to sleep, their faces were filled with heavy fatigue.

Then immediately, they passed by prison guards who were urging cuffed inmates to walk faster. The inmates stopped in displeasure and complained something to the guards.

"Hey, hurry and keep up!"

He realized he had stopped unwittingly, only then did he chase up to the old policeman up ahead, finally reaching a main door where the sign Supervision and Control Room was hanging over.

There were signs of barricades set up previously. A battle had probably taken place here.

There was a human wall erected before the main door.

While saluting and approaching, crime scene investigation personnel dressed in work clothes looked in their direction before naturally parting to provide a path.

Then the collapsed girl was revealed.

"....."

From the standpoint of psychology, a person's attire symbolized how they wished to be perceived by the outside world.

Collapsed with her arms and legs spread out, the girl probably wanted people in the surroundings to think of her as someone rebellious.

Perhaps her dream was to become a rock star with tons of crazed fans while exposed to the nonstop flash of cameras.

If that were the case, then her wish could be said to have been actualized. However, the camera flashes directed towards her were that of criminal scene investigators, that was all.

The direct cause of death was shock caused by a tear through the abdomen.

Her innards had spilled out, splattering a bizarre flower-like pattern on the floor. As though ripped open by a ferocious beast, her wound was left exposed directly.

The girl's eyes remained opened wide in surprise. Until the very end, she must have failed to understand what had happened to her.

"The victim is Ritsu Urabe, an Initiator with an IP rank of 550."

He turned his head to see a plainclothes detective standing there, dressed in a short-sleeved shirt.

With a square face and half-grayed hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses, he gave off an intellectual impression like a scholar, but those thick eyebrows seemed to convey strong willpower.

"You are this place's...?"

"My name is Yoshitatsu Akutsu, a superintendent from the central office. In any case, I am the one in charge here."

Akutsu took out a pack of cigarettes from his chest pocket, placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

"Stop smoking in a crime scene, okay?"

"Hmph, like anyone could stand this smell without covering it up with cigarette smoke—Hey, enough with the photos, take this one out too!"

He motioned to the investigators with his chin, just as they happened to finish drawing the chalk outline. Moving the body onto a stretcher, they covered it with a white cloth and transported it away.

Despite a different appearance, Superintendent Akutsu gave off vibes very similar to the familiar Inspector Tadashima. Both of them must surely be the type of person who stubbornly sticks to crime scenes from beginning to end without compromise.

Once this point was understood, it should be not be hard to handle this type of person.

"Is it really necessary to collect evidence at the scene?"

"How else will the crime be sentenced unless it's made clear who killed who?"

"Ahhh, I see."

Rentaro turned towards Akutsu.

"So the inmates' riot has been suppressed already?"

Closing his eyes, Akutsu breathed out white smoke from his nostrils.

"I suppose."

Rentaro was entirely stunned when he saw the news this morning.

Last night, the inmates of the floating prison had rioted. Three hundred and eighty convicts, in the middle of serving their sentences, had escaped.

Capturing prison guards and family members who lived on the artificial island who had not escaped in time for a total of a hundred and twenty hostages, they had occupied the island.

They had demanded a ransom as well as safe passage out of the Tokyo Area. Although they announced they would kill a hostage for every hour of delay, given the time frame they demanded, it was not enough to prepare the cash and escape channels.

Negotiations broke down. As the time limit passed, the inmates killed the first hostage.

The color of despair entered everyone's face at the scene.

"I'm impressed you guys subdued them in less than half a day."

"The SAT people are the amazing ones. In order to evade the naval mines, they sent scuba divers to land from the back of the island and seized the supervision and control room. Once all the tear gas in the prison had been activated, they used it as a signal to storm the place directly through the front door.

Akutsu exhaled a puff of white smoke towards the air with an exhausted expression.

"Sigh, unfortunately, a number of hostages were ultimately sacrificed, but that was why things could resolve so quickly. Currently, the prison administration is in a dilemma over a shortage of sickbeds and punishment rooms."

"SAT casualties?"

"None, apparently."

Rentaro exclaimed, impressed from the bottom of his heart:

"As expected of professionals."

Akutsu glared viciously at him.

"Hey, what sarcasm are you spouting? Didn't a certain someone take out a whole SAT squad barehanded at the Magata Plaza Hotel? That's not something a human can accomplish at all, wouldn't you agree? — Mr. Hero of the Tokyo Area."

Just as Rentaro reached into his pocket, intending to take out his license, he took out his hand again.

"You recognize me?"

"Duh. I'll tell you this first, right now, there are probably a thousand people in the MPD who wants to take you out. Who asked you to make Superintendent-General Hitsuma and others in the top echelons fall from power? Right now, the human resources system is a total mess. I was just an inspector but suddenly got a rapid promotion to become acting section chief. I love hanging around crime scenes the most, I don't want to be some kind of section chief, okay!?"

"You might as well promote all the way up to become Superintendent-General."

Rentaro grinned mischievously. Feeling utterly annoyed, Akutsu waved his hand and said "Give me a break, don't jinx me."

Rentaro recalled proper matters.

"Is Andrei Litvintsev among the casualties in the quelled inmates?"

"No, he wasn't found. Although it's possible that he is still hiding on the island, my gut feeling begs to differ. According to testimony from other inmates, he was the first to disappear after a bunch of people left the prison..."

Akutsu opened his police notebook, putting it extremely close to his black-rimmed glasses.

"Apart from that, there were other inmates who witnessed a motor boat leaving the artificial island. Although this God forsaken place is paranoid enough to set up naval mines to prevent prisoners from escaping, they successfully escaped without tripping any of the mines. Those guys must have obtained ahead of time the route for evading the mines."

"Isn't that obvious? Those guys took over the control room as the first step, shutting down the security systems for preventing jail breaks. Just from this fact, you can tell they were fully prepared."

Akutsu scratched his head, feeling greatly troubled.

"Damn it, why did something like this happen right when full-scale war is about to break out against the Sendai Area?"

...Speaking of which, these two events did have connections behind them.

At this moment, Rentaro heard a drawn out "Excuse me—"

He looked back to see a young police officer touching the brim of his uniform hat uncomfortably.

"You are Mr. Rentaro Satomi, right? A woman is looking for you..."

Who the heck could it be? Rentaro felt agitated in his heart.

He totally had no time for this right now.

"Tell her I'm busy."

"I've already emphasized many times how unauthorized persons may not enter, but she's very stubborn. Also..."

The police officer hesitated a bit before saying:

"Although I couldn't see her face clearly under the hood, still, what an amazing beauty. I somehow get the feeling that she has this unusual air of nobility, making it hard to oppose her..."

Getting an ominous feeling, Rentaro felt his temples twitch.

He ran back at full speed to see someone in the crowd outside the police tape, waving vigorously at him and even jumping up and down.

"Mr. Satomi, it is I!"

Rentaro could not help but clutch his head and groan.

"Come over for a moment."

Lifting the police tape and pulling the girl by the hand, Rentaro brought her to a deserted place inside the premises of the artificial island prison.

"Why did you come running to this place!?"

The girl pulled her hood back to reveal skin like white porcelain while beautiful hair fell down, rivaling snow in color, shining brightly under the sunlight.

Indeed, she was precisely Seitenshi.

"Didn't you escape to my home to evade pursuers? You'll get discovered like this."

Clasping her hands together as though praying, Seitenshi closed her eyes.

"However, Mr. Satomi, you are clearly running all over the place in order to fulfill the job you are undertaking, yet I am hiding at home all the time unable to express anything at all. Besides, I wish to contribute some measure of meager assistance to you, Mr. Satomi. I was thinking this disguise would be flawless."

Seitenshi twirled around on the spot. Blown by the wind, her skirt fluttered like waves in the sea.

A pure-white shirtdress with an unbuttoned white jacket. White boots. That jacket even had a flimsy hood.

So beautiful.

Rentaro's agitation instantly vanished. He was defeated by this indescribable sight of beauty.

Rentaro thought back carefully. He had never seen her in any clothing apart from that formal dress.

Giving up personal space to become a 100% public figure, wearing that official formal dress at all times apart from in her sleep, it was probably a symbol of her selfless impartiality.

Although that outfit was taken off for the sake of disguising, Rentaro could not help but wonder at this time whether some sort of change had occurred in her mindset or was he overthinking things.

Seeing Rentaro's speechless reaction, Seitenshi lowered her head uneasily, then looked up at him vulnerably as though pleading.

"Does this attire not look good on me...?"

Rentaro turned his face away.

"I-If you want a disguise, don't go picking this kind of outfit that will make heads turn in ten men out of ten just by passing by."

Seitenshi's cheeks turned red. She bowed her head even lower.

"Seriously, Mr. Satomi... No way, could this be..."

Just as the mood was getting awkward, three male crime scene investigators were chatting and laughing while walking over from the opposite building. Seitenshi hastily pulled up her jacket's hood.

Rentaro sighed in relief.

Suddenly, Rentaro noticed Seitenshi looking at the investigators with eyes filled with tender affection.

"Despite the possibility of war breaking out after today, the police organization still continues to function normally. This is all thanks to the Honorable Kikunojyo's capable administration."

Rentaro followed her gaze.

"Not really. Disaster experts call this the 'normalcy bias.'"

Seitenshi widened her eyes and turned to stare at him.

"The 'normalcy bias'... Really?"

"That's right. Even when facing an abnormal situation, humans find it very hard to flip the 'this is abnormal, I must take immediate action' switch. Human minds are actually unexpectedly lazy. Plus the fact that if the surrounding people are calm, they feel 'very disgraceful' if they went into panic alone, so even if the fire has reached their feet, they still have trouble taking action."

"But I believe that the residents had a strong enough sense of criss during the Third Kantou Battle..."

"That's because everyone learned their lesson and knew about the extinction event that would come from a Monolith collapse. After all, the Gastrea War happened only a brief decade ago, with isolated outbreaks of infection happening sporadically, so residents have gotten used to that kind of evacuation at least.

"In contrast, the Japan's last participation in large-scale warfare between humans ended in 1945 with the Second World War. People who served as living history books have almost all died out. Most people cannot predict the future. It's possible they might even be thinking 'a war probably isn't as scary as an epidemic.'"

Seitenshi narrowed her eyes sorrowfully.

"War clearly ought to be more terrifying than that instead..."

Rentaro crossed his arms.

"It's better to say that the Sendai Area has a bigger problem. That side is facing an extinction crisis more urgently than us. In desperation, who knows what that guy Inou's gonna do..."

At this moment, one of the crime scene investigation staff yelled "Hey, you guys!" and ran over to the three investigators who were chatting.

"Hurry and watch television, things have become very serious!"

The three investigators exchanged glances and finally nodded, running to follow the other guy.

Rentaro looked at Seitenshi. Gazing straight at him, she nodded.

"Let us go have a look too."

Entering the prison, Rentaro and Seitenshi followed those investigators to the cafeteria.

This spacious room had a flatscreen television out front with detectives and crime scene investigators surrounding it in a fan shape.

Under the tense atmosphere, everyone was staring at the screen with bated breath.

Rentaro tiptoed to peer at the screen from behind them.

Instantly, he felt a chill creep up his spine.

On the screen, a giant Gastrea resembling a centipede made the towering rock face in the background look like a miniature model. That thing had a reptilian face. The scythe-like pereiopods were too numerous to imagine how many there were.

That was precisely the King of Pestilence—Libra.

But what shocked Rentaro was not Libra's appearance but the translucent virus sacs cradled in its abdomen.

Bulging like balloons, those sacs containing deadly viruses were quivering slightly as though unable to wait for the time to be released.

Rentaro wiped the sweat seeping out from his palm onto his pants.

The scene changed on the television to what seemed to be a live broadcast of a press conference with Inou.

Just as predicted? Waving his fist violently in anger, Inou's enunciation was not very clear. After much effort, Rentaro finally understood he was saying: 'Unless the Tokyo Area makes Libra withdraw before 3am tomorrow morning, we will launch a full-scale attack on Libra and the Tokyo Area.'

The policemen in Rentaro's surroundings entered a clamor.

The television switched to show the broadcast room where the newscaster reminded viewers that as soon as war broke out, they should stay as far away as possible from civilian weapons companies and SDF facilities that might become targets for attack. Then the newscaster reported simple anti-disaster knowledge.

Rentaro fearfully looked to the side. Seitenshi was showing solemn eyes under the edge of her hood, also staring at the television screen.

"Before I sneaked out of the Sacred Residence, I did send an emissary to the Sendai Area, but diplomatic negotiations have apparently reached an impasse."

Seitenshi looked up at Rentaro.

"Mr. Satomi, have you noticed? Despite looking furious, Prime Minister Inou still maintains some rationality in his manner of speech. If one were to think in reverse, despite issuing a speech with such a tough stance, the Sendai Area is hesitating about whether to start a war, is that not correct? Those who understand such signs would naturally know that the other side is expressing their willingness to wait until the final moment, would they not?"

Rentaro was utterly impressed with Seitenshi to the point of speechlessness.

Naturally, she was not someone who became the national symbol through physical appearance and idol worship alone.

After a while, when there was no longer any worthwhile information on the television, Seitenshi relaxed her tense shoulders and said "Let us take a break over there?" with a tired expression and pointed to a corner in the cafeteria.

Hence, Rentaro pulled out a chair to sit down. Although it was still early morning, a tempting aroma was coming out of the kitchen.

"This must be the breakfast prepared by the prison catering staff for the police officers who had spent the whole night cleaning up the aftermath. Mr. Satomi, I shall ask if we may partake in their breakfast."

Before Rentaro could stop her, she stood up and walked to the kitchen to speak with the chef in charge of cooking. Soon after, Seitenshi bowed deeply to the other person.

By the time she returned while saying "sorry for the wait," she was already carrying in her hands a tray with curry.

Although it only arose by chance, to think that the Tokyo Area's highest authority was carrying food out for him...

Rentaro thought to himself: if the female attendants serving Seitenshi were to see this, they would surely clamor loudly. At the same time, he was also greeted by the warm steam from the curry presented before him. He breathed the fragrant aroma of the spices into his nasal cavity all at once.

Although he did not feel hungry, he still dug a spoonful and delivered it to his mouth.

Rentaro was so surprised that his eyes almost popped out of his head.

The combination of sweetness, spiciness and saltiness was absolutely superb. The sweet-tasting onion and potato flowed into his throat together with the curry spreading in his mouth. Rentaro was completely defeated by this strong feeling of happiness.

To be honest, Rentaro had no appetite at all before eating this mouthful, but by the time he noticed, he was already holding the plate up, shoving the food into his mouth ravenously.

But then he looked ahead to see Seitenshi simply holding a spoon, staring at the steaming plate.

"What's with you...?"

"Well... Since my diet in the Sacred Residence is controlled on the level of milligrams to maintain the balance of nutrients, I wonder what they would say if they saw this..."

"You're the head of state. Just eat whatever you like."

Seitenshi quietly shook her head.

"I am not a monarch lording over the populace but simply a spokesperson chosen by the common people. Hence, I must do everything I can for the people."

Seitenshi closed her eyes and stroked her cheek.

"Fortunately, many people praise me for my looks. They hope for me to remain this beautiful forever. If this allows my voice to reach people far away, I will continue to maintain this beauty while carrying the notion that even my body does not belong to me. Once nutritional balance is broken, beauty will be lost and the unstated relationship of trust between myself and the people shall—Mmmmph!"

Finding a spoon suddenly stuffed into her mouth, Seitenshi blinked hard.

The culprit who had inserted the spoon, Rentaro, was rubbing his own shoulder with his free hand.

Just listening to her speak was giving him a back ache.

Seitenshi shuddered slightly and stood up from her chair.

"W-What are you doing!? E-Even my own mother has never been so rude to me—"

"—Anyway, finish eating the food in your mouth before talking."

Faced with what he pointed out, Seitenshi realized she was speaking while chewing food. Instantly, she covered her mouth and went red in the face.

After swallowing the spoonful of food, it was her turn to stare wide-eyed in amazement.

"...Quite delicious."

"I know, right? Forget about the pain in the ass stuff for now, just enjoy the food first. While you're with me, forget the fact that you represent a state. If you can't do that, go home immediately."

"In that case, you do have a point... Thank you, Mr. Satomi."

With a gentle blooming smile, Seitenshi's face was truly too dazzling. Rentaro had no choice but to turn his face away. In order to hide his embarrassment, he started eating the assorted pickles but the taste was unexpectedly sweet and sour.

After that, neither of them engaged in conversation, simply eating quietly for quite a while.

In the end, it was Seitenshi who slowly broke the silence.

"Mr. Satomi, you have made a round through this floating prison, yes?"

"Yeah, Litvintsev has already escaped."

"Did you notice anything else?"

Rentaro instantly stopped the spoon he was bringing to his mouth.

"There's one point which makes me very concerned. An Initiator was killed at the doorway to the supervision and control room. She was sent by the IISO to assist in guarding. IP ranking of 550 formerly. The killer is most likely the one you said to pay extra attention to yesterday, Yulia Kochenkova."

"Is it already confirmed?"

"Come on, someone ranked 550 was defeated in one hit after all."

Rentaro recalled the abdominal wound that looked like it had been ripped open by a tiger, as well as the expression of shock on the victim's face.

He slowly shook his head.

"I got played...! That Yulia Kochenkova girl is undoubtedly even stronger than Enju, the kind of Initiator I absolutely cannot send Enju to fight..."

"Mr. Satomi, I too have pondered Litvintsev's actions, but why did he intentionally take the risk to summon you the day before he was going to escape from prison?"

"....."

"My guess is that this is likely to be a personal message to you, Mr. Satomi. Something along the lines of 'catch me if you can.'"

Rentaro's memory of the pair of unblinking dark eyes, staring at him intently from behind the bars.

Rentaro rubbed his arms for warmth to prevent his teeth from chattering.

In other words, this massive conspiracy, enough to shake the world, was caused by you alone?

By you singlehandedly.

To be honest, Rentaro already wanted nothing to do with them. Just by understanding Litvintsev and his partner Yulia's power level, Rentaro wanted to retreat.

If he continued his pursuit of Litvintsev, intuition told him that he would definitely fall to an irrevocable result.

The enemies were soldiers, all professionals every one of them. A merciless organization with no scruples against murder as means to their ends. A world completely different from his own.

But Rentaro also understood at the same time that he could not falter lightly here.

After all, the price of not taking action would be the sacrifice of unimaginable numbers of people.

"The fight is not over. Now's the time to rack our brains to figure out Litvintsev's possible hiding places."

Rentaro exhaled forcefully, barely maintaining his mental balance.

"Good point. Then first of all, let us imagine where Litvintsev and his gang might have gone off to."

Seitenshi smiled gently.

"I am very honored to be fighting by your side."

Even if it were all bravado, Rentaro commanded himself to only look forward. Leaning his weight on the back of the chair, he crossed his legs.

"Can't we narrow down where those guys might be hiding? It's not like they could escape out of the Tokyo Area in just one day."

"I have considered this point too. No matter how reinforced with varanium the hull of a motor boat, it is insufficient to oppose the threat of marine Gastrea. Very likely, they had landed some place to hide inside the Tokyo Area."

"What about the possibility of escaping the Area by air transport."

"Due to extremely tense relations with the Sendai Area right now, not even an ant can crawl out of the Tokyo Area's air defense net. Although chances of this route are not zero, it should be negligible."

Rentaro cautiously pushed his thoughts further.

"You said the day before yesterday that Litvintsev's gang was using Solomon's Ring and the Scorpion's Head to control Libra, right?"

"Indeed, because Stage Vs are equipped with the ability to communicate with one another using electromagnetic and sound waves, it is possible to use electric currents to stimulate the vocal cords retrieved from the Scorpion's corpse to make them emit electromagnetic signals and sound waves, sending them out through the translation device of the Ring. More simply stated, it is possible to fool Libra into thinking the Scorpion is still alive."

"But if you really think about it, how could electromagnetic waves be sent over to Libra over at Nasu in the Tochigi Prefecture? I remember that the direct distance from here to Nasu is over 150 km, right? Although I don't understand signal engineering completely, can electromagnetic waves travel that far without weakening?"

"That answer is right over your head, Mr. Satomi."

Following Seitenshi's suddenly extended index finger, Rentaro could only see the filthy ceiling and the tear gas vents.

But of course, she was not referring to the ceiling.

Suddenly hit by a flash of inspiration, Rentaro could not help but go "Ah!"

"I see, a satellite...!"

Seitenshi nodded firmly.

"As expected of you, Mr. Satomi, a fast reaction. With a satellite in a geostationary orbit outfitted with a relaying device known as a transponder, electromagnetic waves are first sent to the satellite from a ground facility then amplified using the transponder and finally sent back to the ground. With that, the limitation of physical distance poses almost no hurdle. Litvintsev's gang is most assuredly using this method."

"H-Hold on a sec."

Rentaro extended his hand to interrupt her then organized the chaos in his mind.

"Wait up. Something as expensive as a satellite, how could just anyone use it..."

"Indeed. In the current year of 2031, police, civilian security and military activities are essentially the only ones capable of connecting to satellites. Launching satellites on their own, Shiba Heavy Industries is an exception among exceptions. For example, the satellite phonecall function in your cellphone, Mr. Satomi, was something you only gained the right to buy after receiving your CivSec license."

Rentaro nodded.

Indeed, when certain jobs brought CivSecs to taking action in unexplored territory, satellite phones capable of making calls without cellphone reception were clearly indispensable. Likewise, high-accuracy GPS functions also required authorization.

"Are satellites still that precious nowadays?"

"Yes, a geostationary satellite's lifespan only ranges from five to fifteen years. Hence, they must be launched frequently, but after the Gastrea War, almost all countries have lost satellite launching capabilities. Besides, during the war, many satellites were also shot down by Sagittarius."

"Now that you mention it, that's true..."

Enduring the bitter spit in his mouth, Rentaro looked down.

"As a result, Litvintsev's hideout must be equipped with devices for satellite uplinks and downlinks. Locations ought to be limited by narrowing down to this range."

"Uplink means what you just mentioned, sending signals to a satellite, right? And downlink means receiving signals sent by a satellite to the ground... Right?"

"Indeed."

"Then that's the same as uploading and downloading on the internet."

Tilting her head with her index finger against her chin, Seitenshi raised her eyebrows.

"Completely different, is it not?"

Rentaro pretended not to hear her and continued to think deeply.

"So, a facility capable of uplink and downlink, how many are there in the Tokyo Area?"

"One."

"Huh?"

Rentaro was stunned.

"Then haven't we found those guys' hideout!?"

Seitenshi solemnly shook her head.

"Not that place."

"Eh, but—"

"—That place is absolutely impossible, which is why my staff at the Sacred Residence have been out of ideas."

Feeling inexplicably intimidated by her, Rentaro did not know if he should pursue the matter further.

But since she already said that place was impossible, then he should rule it out from the list of suspected locations for now.

Damn it, in the end, all of his superficial thinking had already been covered by Seitenshi's contemplation a long time ago.

Had all clues reached dead ends now? Was there nothing he could do except gnash his teeth and watch Litvintsev instigate total war between the Tokyo and Sendai Areas?

Just as his thoughts were about to hit rock bottom, a savior appeared from an unexpected place.

Suddenly squeezing his way next to Rentaro's side, making a "ooph" kind of sound like an old man, taking a seat in a forceful manner, it was Superintendent Akutsu holding a plate of curry in his hand.

The eyes, deeply set in his dry and skinny face, glared at Rentaro sharply.

"You asshole of a brat, how could you shameless eat the breakfast that was prepared for us? And you even brought your woman to a crime scene."

Seitenshi stood up, causing her chair to make a noise. Her face was completely red while her mouth opened and closed.

"W-We are most certainly not Mr. Satomi's... w-woman or whatever, okay!?"

"Huh? We?"

"A-Anyway, putting that aside, what's the matter?"

Rentaro forced a change in subject. Although Akutsu muttered "somehow I find this voice familiar from somewhere" with his head tilted in puzzlement but in the end, he oriented his entire body towards Rentaro.

"You two are trying to track down Litvintsev's whereabouts, right?"

"Yeah."

Akutsu narrowed his eyes and smiled malevolently:

"—Then you're in luck. I've already found an eye witness who might know where Litvintsev went."

Author's Notes

Holding this book in your hand, dear reader, I'm sure you must be surprised by the unexpectedly low thickness, right?

In the Black Bullet series where each installment was always three hundred pages or so, this volume might be relatively thin.

During preliminary conceptions, because Volumes 3 and 4 and Volume 5 and 6 were paired up as duologies, I wanted Volume 7 to be a single volume story like Volume 1 or 2. However, my writing speed ran into trouble so I had no choice but to cut things off halfway, thus presenting the story in the current form.

I am extremely sorry to all the readers who were expecting this volume to have an equal amount of content as previous installments.

But that being said, regrets are not going to help. I will do everything I can to make the next volume more interesting.

About the comic adaptation

The March 27 issue of comic magazine Dengeki Maoh will be featuring the Black Bullet manga adaptation's second installment of Black Bullet Interlude FAQ! will start serializing. Its subject (probably) belongs to the super hilarious type. If you want to see abua-sensei's uniquely sensitive personality, illustrating the frequently screaming and crying Black Bullet characters, you must not miss out.

Now for the acknowledgements.

Still extending deadlines to the extreme this time and fighting a tough battle, there is the editor in charge, a certain Mr. Kurosaki; fulfilling deadlines despite a schedule demanding a master juggler's skills, illustrator Ukai-sensei; Morinohon-sensei, abua-sensei and everyone in the editorial department who is in charge of the comic adaptation; I wish to offer my sincere thanks to all staff involved with this series.

Finally, there is every single one of you, dear readers. By the time this book is published, the anime adaptation will be about to air. I hope that the anime version of Black Bullet will be interesting for everyone too.

I am truly grateful to you for picking up this book. I wish for God's blessings to all the dear readers of my work.

Shiden Kanzaki

アニメ化おめでとう!
この子達が画面を動き回るのを
見られるなんてことも嬉しいです!!
皆さんも是非見て下さいね!!!
感謝